Report

Shaping product advantage

How early-stage B2B SaaS startups can increase their product launch success by taking a customer- and competitive centred approach

Strategic Product Design
Master thesis Roy de Groot
November 2021

T̃U Delft   **Lynk**

Preface

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How early-stage B2B SaaS startups can increase their product launch success by taking a customer- and competitive centred approach

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November, 2021

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11 November, 2021

Dear reader,

You have downloaded my final work as a design student and final deliverable for the master Strategic Product Design at the TU Delft. It has been a long journey, starting at Industrial Product Engineering in Rotterdam, switching to Strategic Product Design, and with every step, I have felt myself grow. Skill-wise. Network wise. But more importantly, personally. This thesis has been an incredibly humbling experience due to the connection to my startup, creating the richest learning experience I have ever felt. I am very grateful for the opportunity and am proud to present the results and share the insights that have helped me rethink what a product is and what customer centredness means. But I could not have done it with the help of several people.

Firstly, the team at Lynk. Thank you all for the trust and support to do my thesis in the context of our startup. Without your work, this thesis would not have been possible. Special thanks to Ruben for your unlimited positive energy, belief and unrelenting force forwards. You create the space where I can let go of some of my judgemental aspects and just do. Mathias, Maarten, and Mitchell, thank you for your kindness, due diligence, and way of approaching problems. You offer me a mirror through which I learn more about myself and can grow. I cannot put into words how fortunate I feel about working with such wizards, knowing that there practically is no limit to what we can make, which is both motivating and scary at the same time.

Then, I am very grateful and lucky with my supervisory team, who provided the opportunity to do this thesis in my startup. I could not have imagined a better fitting supervisory team. Thank you, Jeroen, for swimming with me in abstract thoughts and helping me find structure in the mayhem. Thank you, Erik-Jan, for the pep talks and all the mountains of knowledge you shared in coaching sessions and through your earlier work, which this thesis tries to apply in practice. Thank you both for the fun coaching sessions in which you challenged me and the belief that it would turn out all right.

Thank you, friends and family, for supporting me whenever I needed it. And also for letting me go when I didn't need it. Thank you, Mom's and Dad's and sister, for supporting me every step of the way and believing in me; I knew you always had my back and could not have done it without knowing that. Thank you, Joia, for always bringing me back to my path and teaching me to check in. Thank you, roommates, for making life fun, challenging each other and always being there when necessary

Finally, thank you, Mo. For making me laugh, calming me down, teaching me how not to judge myself, and staying with me in moments, I am not the most pleasant person to be around. You help me breathe out, enjoy.

Enjoy reading!

Roy de Groot

Executive summary

Eleven out of twelve startups still fail (Startup Genome, 2019). Even though startups are a growing breed of companies. From 2016 to 2018, startups created $2.8 trillion in value, which is more than the annual GDP of the United Kingdom. In the same period, growth was at 20,6% increase from the preceding periods. Even though startups are growing in popularity, and on macro-economic scale a force to be reconed with, on the individual level they are still major gains to be made.

As co-founder of Lynk, the startup used as a case in this thesis, I understand the hype around becoming a startup founder and the struggle and uncertainty coming with it. At Lynk, we are developing a B2B SaaS Document-Project Management (bingo lingo) solution for the construction industry. The product is struggling with gaining traction with customers as sales conversations are long and pilots postponed or delayed. As with the other eleven out of twelve failed startups, Lynk is having difficulty with becoming successful. Or, in other words, to launch their product.

The aim of this thesis is twofold;

Develop and evaluate an improved product launch plan for Lynk.

Create new learnings on how startups might effectively launch a B2B SaaS products by connecting theory to practice.

To accomplish these goals, an action research approach is taken. With two purposes, to bring theory into practice and help bridge the gap between marketing literature and practice. At the same time, an autoethnographic reflective perspective is taken to create rich data from which new learnings are created.

To develop and evaluate an improved product launch plan, the project is divided into two phases, the research and design phase. Field texts are written throughout the project and transformed into autoethnographic texts by connecting the events to literature. The texts create rich data for the development of the launch plan for Lynk, as forming anecdotal learnings for other entrepreneurs.

In the research phase, a literature review is carried out and synthesised into product launch criteria concerning launch strategy and B2B selling practices. Second, Lynk's launch practices are critically assessed through empirical research. Interviews and observations are analysed to evaluate strategic launch opportunities in each segment. Furthermore, through observations and autoethnographic reflection, Lynks sales practices are assessed. Based on the critical assessment of Lynk's launch practices, two improvement plans are proposed to improve Lynk's product launch. First, by developing a niche launch strategy, second by improving Lynk's discovery and learning practices to inform future strategic planning.

The design phase explores both improvement plans. A niche positioning is developed for the two most opportune segments, translating deep customer insights regarding jobs, pains and competitive alternatives into a differentiative value proposition. While a founders sales approach is proposed that embeds customer-centred discovery practices in Lynk's customer conversations to improve reliable data gathering. The niche positionings are evaluated through a second empirical study; both new customers interviews and ongoing sales conversations are used to evaluate the new positionings. The evaluation shows the customers are interested in the value proposition, but some insights regarding product improvements are gathered. For the next iteration, it is proposed that Lynk should reduce implementation complexity and invest in both early adopters and resellers.

Finally, the product launch plan is delivered to Lynk in the form of a Strategic Roadmap. The niche positioning, evaluations and customer-first discovery approach are evaluated through internal sessions with the team. From which input for further launch plan development are created. The launch plan for Lynk is summarised in a

Although the road of a startup is unclear, it can be said that both the strategic planning practices underlying the positioning and customer-focused discovery help Lynk to improve its product launch plan. The positioning and discovery approach proposed in this thesis might

help other B2B startups analyse their launch practices and improve their launch plan by taking a customer- and competitive first approach.

This thesis aimed to improve Lynk's launch plan. The proposed launch plan and underlying practices might help Lynk launch more effectively and improve further product development and launch in less time. On a personal note, my understanding of products and startups has changed significantly because of this thesis. By bringing theory into practice and reflecting on it in relation to daily practice, I feel I now better understand what makes a launch a success and how I can guide the development towards that. That will help in this startup, but even more so in the next. By understanding product launches better, I feel it has also improved my ability to assess and evaluate startup opportunities by considering competitive and adoption criteria.

For any startup founder reading this, my giveaway would be that any product competes with other solutions. Deeply understanding the customers view on that solution, their job and the concept of product advantage will help to shape product strategy and launch products effectively.
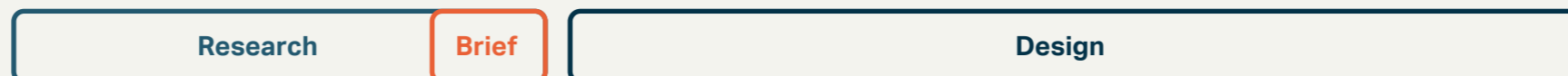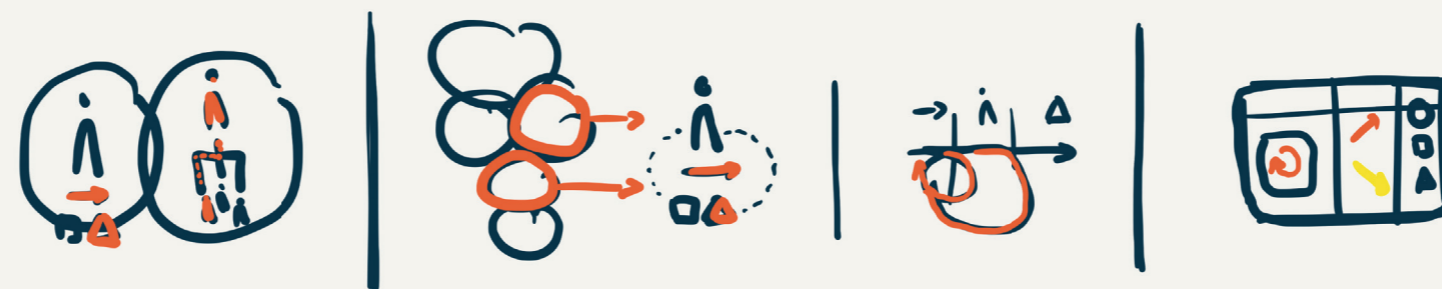
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1. Introducing the project

This chapter introduces the starting aspects that influenced the shaping of the assignment of this thesis. It started with a personal ambition to expand my knowledge from the design to launching products successfully, and with the opportunity to design the launch strategy for the B2B Startup Lynk (of which I am co-founder). Resulting in a unique position for a participatory research approach with the aim to create a practical, new understanding of how to create launches as entrepreneurs that might help other B2B entrepreneurs create their launch.

1.1 Introduction

A personal fascination to understand B2B product launches

This thesis has started with a personal fascination. Designing the right product does not mean the product will be successful. 'The right' from my eyes mend, the product is valuable to the user, takes into account sustainability and is technically feasible. But more importantly, it creates value for the user. During my master's I have experimented with entrepreneurship in the shape of consultancy, and now developing a software product. In an entrepreneurial setting, you are confronted by the consequence that value only arises when your product/service gets used by customers. Meaning, the right product is the one that launches successfully.

That is why the course Brand-& Product commercialisation (BPC) intrigued me. The course touches upon positioning, brand and launch campaigns with the goal to teach you the theories and skills to develop a successful new product/service launch. Where the course mostly focussed on the creative and promotional aspects of the launch design. For me it left some questions unanswered. For example, what determines the success of an actual product launch? And what elements are a launch made up of? Aside from differentiation, brand-and-launch integrity and novelty. Or what as an entrepreneur should you steer your startup towards to set your product launch up for success? Secondly, the BPC course focussed on B2C products. Arguably B2B products and their launches are different. But how? And what makes a B2B product launch successful?

The context, DMS/PMS B2B SaaS Startup (Lingo Bingo!)

The Design Strategy Projects in the Master had shown me the way towards B2B innovation. B2B projects create a large 'behind the scenes' impact, businesses are focussed on innovation, and design seems to be missing in many sectors resulting in a large added benefit as a designer. This mix made me compelled to explore B2B opportunities more. And in the summer of 2020, I joined the B2B software startup Lynk as co-founder.

After doing a consultancy project in the construction industry the co-founding team of Lynk recognised a potential. In 2019 the team of a designer/businessperson and three software developers set out to develop their own product aimed at Document/Project Management since major problems in the construction sector arise around collaboration on key documents throughout the process.

The construction industry is known for its lack of innovation, incumbent software providers are no different. Most incumbents date back to the '90s or '00s while still being successful. Think of the acquisition of Aconex by Oracle for 1.6 billion (Redrup, 2018)) dollars or Docstream, one of the largest competitors by market share in the Netherlands (based on the presence at customers conversations held by Lynk). Major problems with information management and quality control are still present. Resulting in 5% failure cost in the sector on average (ABN AMRO, 2019).

The collaboration between many stakeholders is complex, and incumbent software providers based on the macro segment challenges have not solved the problem yet. Lynk set out to innovate one of the central software tools for contractors, the Document Management Systems (DMS). Product definition and early evaluation were done together with a small group of potential early customers.

The product is initially focused on Mid-to-Large sized General Contractors in the Netherlands and is aimed at the design & execution phases of the construction process (appendix II, construction process overview). The value proposition of Lynk is to ;

Make complex projects easy, by intuitively embedding quality control throughout the workflow of the whole project team.

But in a broader sense, the positioning for Lynk is understood to be targeted at , "Document-heavy complex project based teams" to keep eyes open for other opportunities. Appendix I introduces the product functionalities more in-depth,
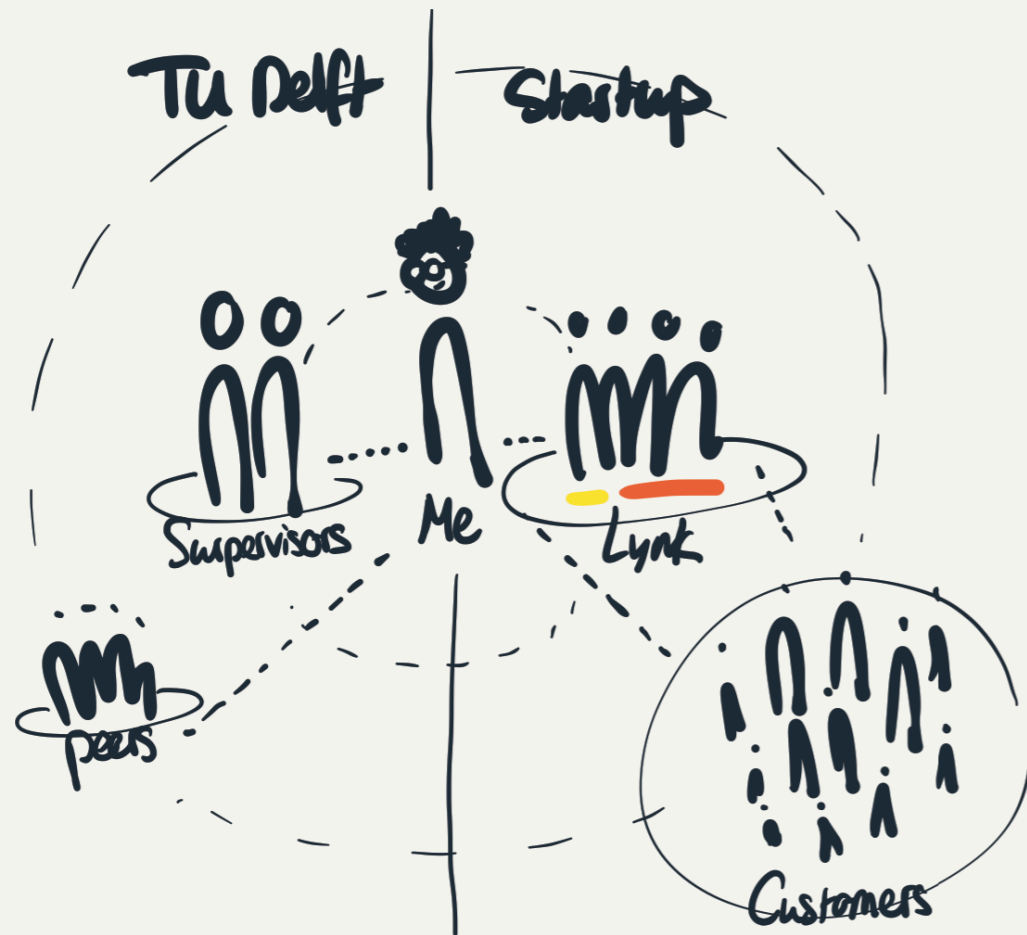
▲ Figure 1. The different stakeholder groups in this project

1.2 Initial assignment

In terms of launching the product, one of the key challenges Lynk is dealing with is the long sales cycles and high level of requirements by customers before new products are implemented. That is why developing the MVP version of the product took quite some time from mid 2019 until late 2020. From the end of 2020, Lynk has started more intensive sales cycles with the goal to gain the first pilots but these are not having success yet. In other words, the product is deemed to be ready, but early-traction is not yet happening.

This thesis brings together personal fascination, a startup that needs a launch plan and my position as co-founder of and early-stage startup. Together this creates the context for this thesis.

The of this thesis is twofold. First, to improve Lynk's product launch, second to create learnings on how to launch B2B SaaS products as startup.

Project stakeholders

Multiple stakeholders take part in this project. Figure 1 shows the network of stakeholders.

The supervisory team consists out of,
Prof. dr. Erik-Jan Hultink as Chair
MSc. Jeroen Coelen as Mentor

First off, as an Strategic Product Design student, my relationship with the Master and my supervisory team is paramount, for guidance on the process, academic aspects and challenging me to work thoroughly. But the supervisory team also has the perfect background to support and enrich this project, as Erik-Jan is professor on New Product Marketing and Jeroen is PhD candidate on Entrepeneurship and Design in startups.

Second, as mentioned the assignment is done in colabration with the startup Lynk, of which I am co-founder. This gives me both freedom and mandate to execute projects. Throughout the thesis, the co-founding team of Lynk should be kept up-to-date, and involved in either decision regarding implementation and sharing of knowledge generated in this thesis.

The twofold assignments of this thesis are,

1. Develop and evaluate an improved product launch plan for Lynk

2. Create learnings on how startups might effectively launch B2B SaaS products by connecting theory to practice

1.3 Project approach

Chapter 1.1 described the context in which this thesis originated. Two goals emerged, 1) to design a product launch plan, and 2) to generate methods and tactics that might help other B2B entrepreneurs develop their launch. This chapter describes the approach to reach those two goals. I propose that the two goals can be symbiotic. Without doing, no practical insights on the implementation of theory can be gathered. While doing without strong theoretical grounding, would be limited to the knowledge of the actors involved in the practice. Figure 1 shows the overview of the research approach taken in this thesis, combining Action Research approach and Autoethnographic perspective.

▲ Figure 2. Action research approach to plan, action, observice and reflect

Action research, bringing theory into practice

Choosing what method to use is inherited by the goal and context of the thesis. The context is startups. Ries (2011) proposes that a startup is "a human institution designed to deliver a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty" (p.17). This means the startup processes are inherently cultural in nature. Furthermore, the second goal for this thesis is to create practical learnings that might prove valuable for other B2B entrepreneurs.

To create this practical outcome, in a cultural dynamic context it is chosen to take an action research approach (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Action research states that complex problems are best researched by introducing change into these processes and observing their effects (Avison et al., 2001). Furthermore, action research aims "to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives" (Reason & Bradbury, p.4). It does this by bringing theory into practice and reflecting on the implications. The researcher works towards practical outcomes, while also progressing theoretical knowledge (Reason & Bradbury, 2004).

Furthermore, Gummesson (2014) suggests that action research might prove valuable to cross the gap between theory and practice in the marketing literature. This gap partly emerges because marketing researchers and practitioners are rewarded for different outcomes. Where researchers try to capture and explain the complexity in

B2B marketing and progress theory. Practitioners aim for business outcomes and move their business forward. Practitioners might not find the complexity valuable in improving daily operations (Perry & Gummesson, 2004). With action research, both outcomes are achieved.

Figure 1 shows the approach that Action research proposes. First a challenge is chosen and relevant knowledge around that topic is researched an synthesised. Then an asement of the situation in which the challenges takes place is made. From the assessment a plan for improvement is made and brought into the situation which generates data. Afterward reflection on the influence of the actions on the situation are key to generate learnings. Which can form the basis of a new plan for improvements and closes the loop, starting over again (Mertler, 2009). Through observations and reflections action research proposes to generate new valuable practical and theoretical knowledge.

Traditional action research determines the researcher and practitioner as separate roles (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). But as mentioned earlier the gap in theory and practice emerges from these separate roles. A different perspective within the action research approach can be taken to mitigate this gap.
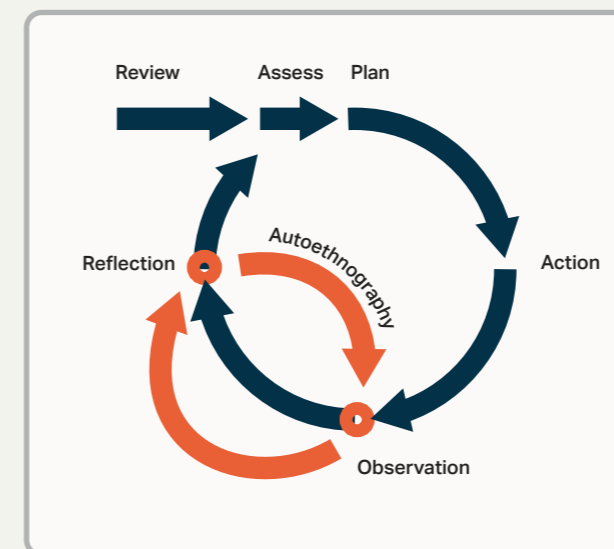
Participatory position, co-founder as researcher

As co-founder of the startup, I am in a unique position to embrace an involved participatory research perspective. Which might close the gap between theory generation and practice (Perry & Gummesson, 2004; Chang, 2016). Taking such an involved and participating perspective helps entrepreneurs to explain their process and create a more general and broadened learning (van Oorschot, 2018).

The research method that enables such a participatory position is Autoethnography (Chang, 2016). In Autoethnography "the researcher observes the culture, interacts with the culture, is engaged in asking questions and re-frames his own interpretation of the empirical data" (van Oorschot, 2018, p.96). Through the rich personal data, and linking to theory generalised new knowledge can be generated.

In autoethnography, the data comes from 'Field texts'. These texts are written by the researcher and capture events and the reflections of events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). By constantly rewriting, and reorganising field texts, integrity can be maintained, while still tapping in the richness of own personal experience unique to

The field texts once connected to theory form Autoethnograpic pieces. The writing of field texts, and connecting to literature does not have to b2 be sequential. But the final text is most valuable if data, reflection and theory are presented in one piece (van Oorschot, 2018).

Autoethnographic texts can take three forms. The first, realistic tales describe situations as realistically as possible and aim to create clarity around social and cultural context. Second, confessional tales describe how personality traits, flaws, bad habits or biases of the researcher influenced a situation (negatively). Third, impressionist tales describe memorable or rare moments in the study. These texts explore these moments more in detail and emphasise the social context (van Maanen, 1988; van Oorschot, 2018).

The texts can be summarised by seeing their perspective. Respectively they focus on 'the done', 'the doer' and 'the doing of fieldwork' (van Maanen, 1988, p.102). A complete Autoethnographic text is made up of three parts. The context describes the situation in which the field text takes place. The text itself, the actual field text, taking one of the earlier mentioned forms. The reflection, reflection on the field text and links the autoethnographic text to literature.

Summarising the approach and method

The goal of this thesis is to create learnings on how to launch B2B SaaS products effectively. To reach this goal, literature will be researched and summarised. The theoretical foundation will form the basis of an assessment of Lynk's current launch plan. After this assessment a plan to improve Lynk's launch success will be made, and evaluated. Throughout the process I will take a research perspective as co-founder, and generate data from the personal and dynamic context within the startup. This will enable the generalisation of new understanding on creating an effective launch of B2B SaaS products within a startup by bringing theory into practice.

1.4 Report structure

The previous chapter described how this project is approached using Action Research and the project structure thus took the shape of planning, action, observation and reflection with an Autoethnography perspective. To make sure the outcome of the process is clear to understand, report is structured according to the Double Diamond (Design Council, 2019). Figure 2 shows the report structure linking the chapters to the Double Diamond, and connects the autoethnographic texts.

Discovery

In the discovery phase, a literature review (chapter 2) is done regarding the outline of an effective product launch, the influence of SaaS on the launch and summarises Startup practices. This review is translated into key launch criteria for early-stage B2B SaaS startups and form the basis for developing Lynk's launch improvement plan.

Define

On the basis of early-stage launch criteria, Lynks launch strategy and early-stage distribution practices are critically analysed (chapter 3). The launch strategy assessment showed that Lynk lacked strategic focus, as Lynk used no clear segmentation. A segmentation is created and used to analyse the potential for product advantage in each segment. The launch tactics of Lynk are analysed on the basis of B2B sales practices. It showed that Lynk is practising intense sales, but due to the lack of strategic focus is having a hard time creating initial traction. Furthermore, a clear process of learning about customer conversations seemed to be missing. The product launch practice assessment finalised the first diamond and delivered two improvement plans, one focussing on developing a niche launch strategy to increase product advantage, while the other will look to increase Lynk's sales approach.

Develop

In the development phase the two improvement plans are developed. First, two niche positionings are developed (chapter 4) by taking a customer and competitive centred approach. The new positionings aim to link clear customer needs to product benefits and shape product advantage. Second, the improved founder sales process is proposed (chapter 5), which aims to improve sales outcomes by better navigating customer buying centres and improving systematic learning from customer conversations. These two improvements are brought together for the delivery phase.

Deliver

The improved positioning and founders' sales approach are brought into practice and evaluated (Chapter 6). Further launch plan improvements are proposed; Lynk should focus on finding early adopters, core jobs, and implementation complexity. While putting more attention on resellers, the founders should become experts in tendering and project coordination. The launch plan and improvements are summarised in an all-encompassing Product Launch Roadmap (chapter 7). Finally, the project's outcome is reflected upon and brought together with the learnings from the autoethnographic texts to propose B2B Product launch tips for other founders (chapter 8).

1.5 Key take-aways

Lynk is a B2B SaaS Startup that is struggling to gain traction - The assignment of this thesis is to research, assess and improve Lynk's launch practices - Through autoethnographic texts learnings regarding the development of a product launch in early-stage startup are created. The report is structured according to the Double Diamond.

1 | Project introduction

Design chapter

Autoethnographic text

2 | Theoretical foundation

Discover

Define

3 | Assessing Lynk's launch practices

Text 1 | Barking up the wrong tree

4 | Shaping product advantage

Text 2 | Speaking the same language

Develop

5 | Embedding discovery & learning practices

Text 3 | The right kind of uncomfortable

6 | Evaluating the launch improvements

Text 4 | The rocky road backwards

Deliver

7 | Delivering the product launch plan

8 | Finalising the project

Text 5 | Spotting castles in the air

▲ Figure 3. The report structure following the Double Diamond, and correlating autoethnographic texts

2. Theoretical foundation

The goal for this thesis is to generate new knowledge around the launch of B2B SaaS startups that might help other entrepreneurs launch their products more effectively. A strong theoretical foundation is key to be able to assess Lynk's current launch practices, implement best practices and learn from that implementation as proposed through Action research and the autoethnographic perspective.

2.1 The outline of an effective product launch

A product launch is a complex orchestration of activities. Both preperation and execution of the product launch are part of the plan, and decisions that need to be made. Even though product launches can take 1000 shapes, research clearly shows the outline and underlying components of the most effective one. A Niche innovative product launch focusses on a small segment, develop a product that has a clear added value for that segment, and it's purpose to gain high market penentration in that segment (Hultink et al., 1997; Moore & McKenna, 1999).

The launch story

Although I personally have a distaste for using a war analogy in my thesis, the story does help to clearly explain the overall product launch dynamics and introduce the marketing concepts underlying them. According to Moore & McKenna (1999) succesfull product launches follow a 'beachhead market strategy', just as the Allies used to invade Europe in the Second World War.

The Allies could succesfully invade the well entrentreched Axis forces (competitors) because they focussed a large share of their combined power (product and distribution) on a single beach , Normandy (market segment). The result of the Allies their combined power overwhelmed the Axis (product advantage), and was only possible because they focussed on such a small beach.

Only when the Allies had taken control of the beach and formed a landing spot for reinforcements the Allies pushed forwards into neighborouring regions, countries to eventually take over Europe.

The launch at Normandy can be seperated into two components,Strategy and Tactics, or preperation and execution. Product launches can also be seperated into these two components and further unpack Product Launch strategy.
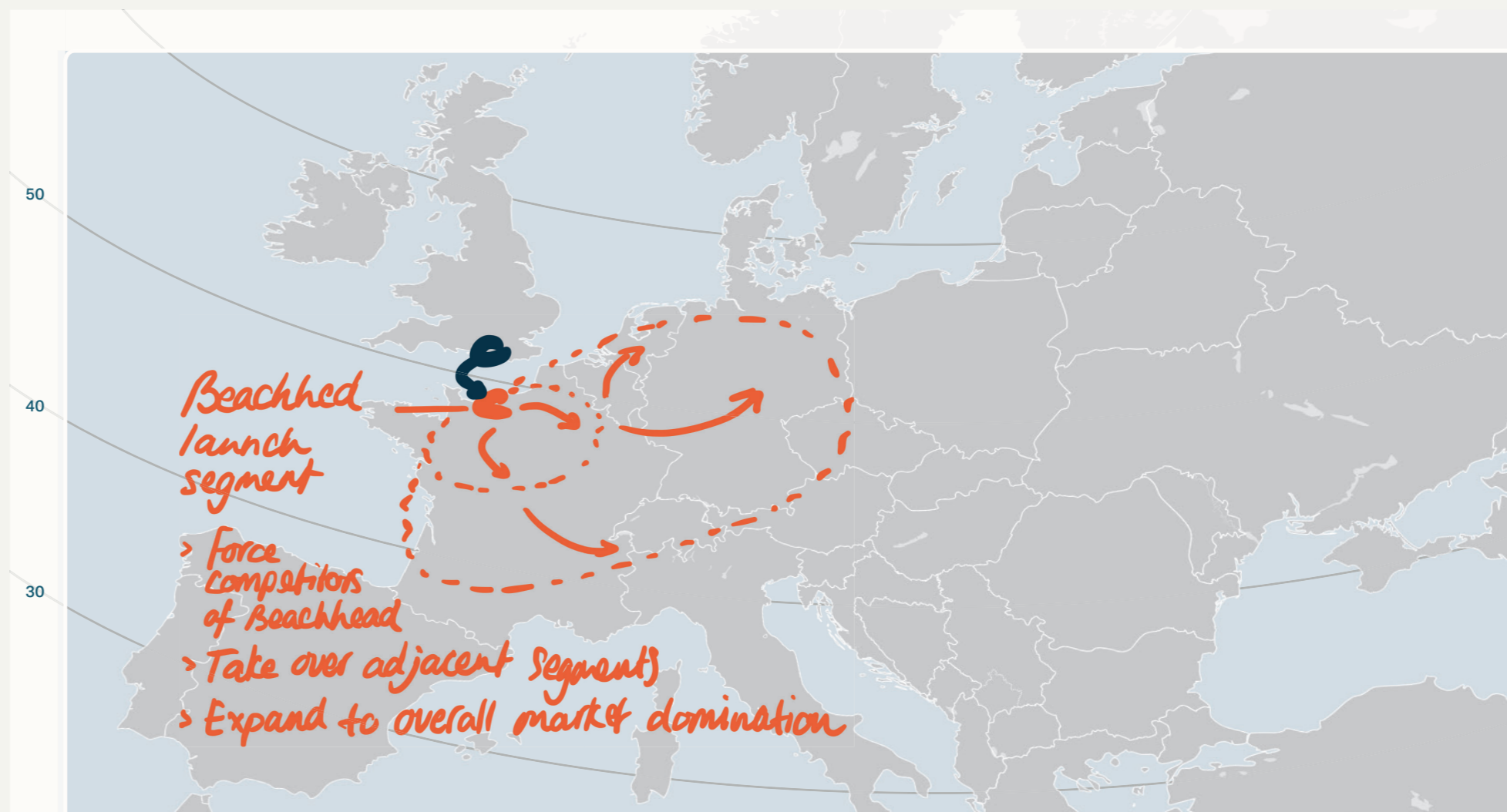
▲ Figure 4. The beachhead product launch strategy, metaphorically visualed as 'War plan'

Launch components

Without Strategy no effective launch. But without Tactics no launch at all. Everything you 'see' of a launch are Tactics. But in every Tactic there are underlying Strategic choices, made explicitly or inexplicitly.

Strategy

"Plans are worthless, but planning is everything" said Eisenhower, the World War II leader and president of the United States (Quote investigator, 2021). Strategy is product launch planning, and about defining the 'posture' , who to target with what. Planning requires the research options and contigencies. The insights generated through planning are vital to the selection of the right actions to setup the launch for success.

Tactics

There is a saying "Execution is everything", since without execution planning is just a paper exercise and has to real impact in the world. You can have the best idea in the world, but if you cannot execute it there is nothing. Tactics are about all activities that actually launch the product, get it in the hands of customers, aquire new customers and to start generating revenue.

2.2 Product launch strategy

The previous chapter explained the dynamics of an effective product launch; this chapter unpacks the launch strategy in its primary components. The goal of product launch strategy is to determine the 'posture' of the launch, which will result in an advantageous position in a market, and product advantage is achieved. Product advantage is achieved if customer needs, competitive insights, and market characteristics are interpreted and translated into a positioning that is 'obviously awesome' in the customer's eyes. Figure 4 highlights the relation between customer, market and competition, while Figure 5 visualises the main components of the product launch together.

▲ Figure 6. Product launch strategy visualisation

Customer-first

It all ends and starts with the customer. Customers are the market. Customers have needs, look for solutions, assess solutions and choose the new solutions that they will use. But, customers don't buy products for the sake of it. Customers buy products because it delivers value to them; it helps them do their job better/faster/cheaper (Christensen et al., 2007; Ulwick, 2016). Understanding what your customer is trying to achieve is step one in even thinking in the right direction of an effective product launch. Ulwick's (2016) jobs-to-be-done framework is a useful approach in helping to uncover customer needs by understanding what customers are trying to achieve— separating core jobs from outcome jobs. Core jobs describe what someone is trying to achieve. Outcome jobs describe how the stakeholders evaluate what is good on dimensions of performance, social, and emotional needs. The separation of jobs is an important step in creating more nuanced and complete insights regarding customer needs.
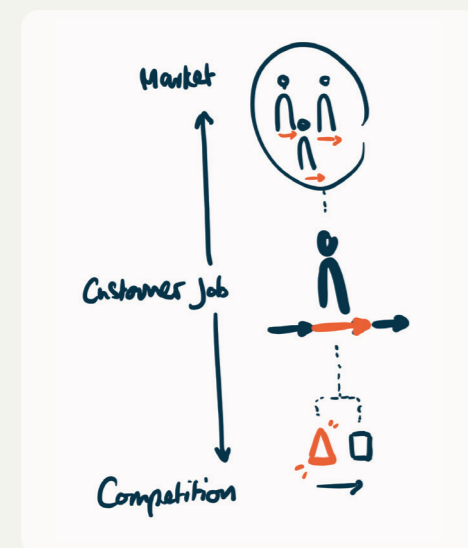
Competitive alternatives

There are always competitive alternatives for the new product to be launched, from hacked solutions to products offered by competitors. These competitive alternatives are the frame of reference from which customers assess new products and evaluate their adoption decision. Therefore, competitive alternatives are critical to understanding the opportunities available in a market and form the foundation for evaluating the new products 'real world' value (Christensen et al., 2007; Rijsdijk et al., 2011).

As literature shows, product advantage -the added value of the new product over competitive alternatives- is the most influential factor to product launch success (Cooper, 1979; Montoya-Weiss & Calantone, 1994; Hultink & Hart, 1998; Hart & Tzokas, 2000; Rijsdijk et al., 2011). Rijsdijk et al. (2011) dissect product advantage into product meaningfulness and superiority as distinct advantages. Meaningfulness means valuable differentiation, making something new and valuable possible for the customer. Superiority means better performance on common grounds from the competition. In any case, meaningfulness is not enough, and new products should perform equal or better than competitive alternatives. This means that new products should focus on improving essential problems, focusing on product qualities that matter to the customer, and aim to deliver benefits that were not possible before while also considering value delivered by current solutions available to the customer.
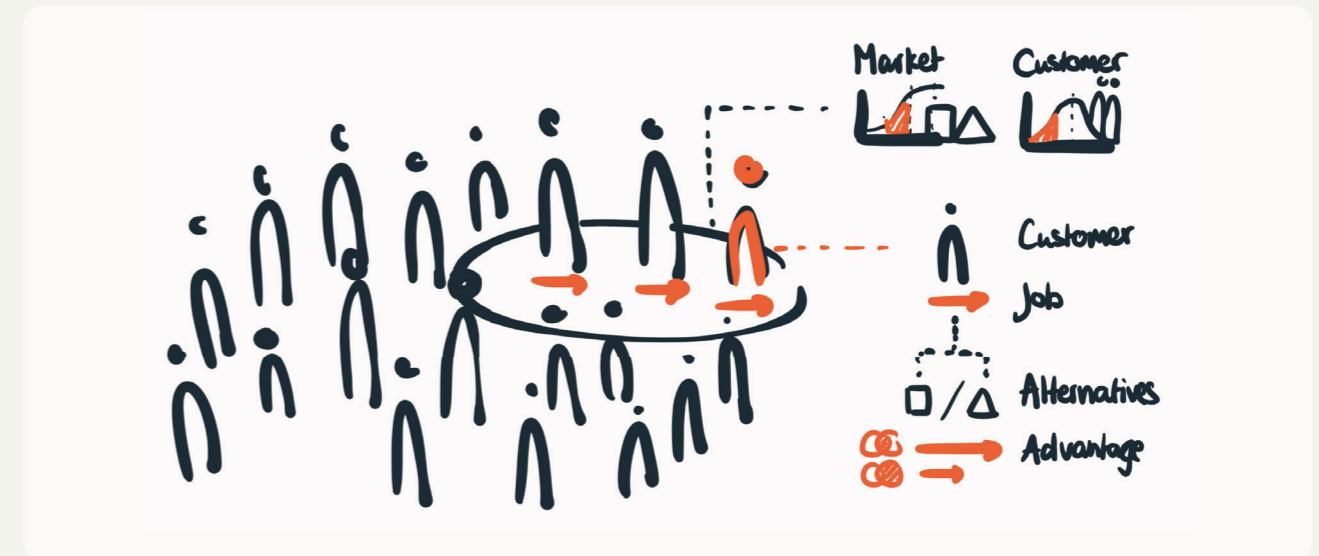
Market characteristics

Developing a product for one customer is bad business. Thus markets exist in the minds of marketers. Markets can be described as a group of potential customers with the same underlying need. Therefore a product can be marketed effectively to them. Markets can be described using a few characteristics and influence the product launch design (Moore & McKenna, 1999; Christensen et al., 2007).

A market can be new or existing. Existing markets are already developed. Customers thus understand their needs and have a clue of the available solutions. New markets still need to be developed. Prospects need to be made aware of problems and to understand the product benefits (Beard & Easingwood, 1996; Moore & McKenna, 1999; Hart & Tzokas, 2000).

Next to the development of the market, the types of customers in the market can be segmented according to attitude towards innovation making up, early and mainstream markets. Early markets, innovators and early adopters are interested in 10x performance improvements. In mainstream markets, the early majority and late majority are interested in incremental improvements and value continuity.

The dimensions of market maturity and customer innovativeness are essential to understand since these influence the launch significantly. Existing markets need product differentiation based on features, while customers in new markets need to be educated, and communication should focus on benefits. Early markets are approached with 'innovation', while mainstream markets need incremental improvements with low risks (Beard & Easingwood, 1996; Moore & McKenna, 1999; Schuhmacher et al., 2018).

Segmentation

Segmentation is a tool for companies to analyse and group markets based on common characteristics, with the purpose to be able to effectively market the new product (Kotler, 2021). Effective segmentation is based on usage needs, actual behaviour and does not get lost in technical details (Yankelovich & Meer, 2006). Segmentation based on jobs is therefore an effective one as it taps into the customer's worldview and needs (Christensen et al., 2007).

Positioning

Strategic analysis, insights and summaries by themselves are not actionable. Positioning functions to bridge Strategy to development and distribution activities. All strategic decisions come together in the product positioning. Positioning is about the 'position' the new product should take in the market, and more specifically, in the eyes of the customer (Kotler, 2021; Dunford, 2019). In B2B, 'real' needs are often unknown. Framing the real need in relation to the influence layers in the organisation creates the opportunity for a strong positioning. Furthermore, because of the competitive nature, a strong track record of innovation and reliability can help ensure the customer you are the right partner to stay ahead. (Beverland, 2018).

2.3 Product launch tactics

In this chapter the different elements of launch Tactics are described. First we start with what the elements are, what makes an effective one and then dive into each topic seperately. Launch tactics can be defined in two 'components'. 1) Distribution, making the product available to the markett, and 2) Growth, creating and fulfilling demand. The launch tactics summarised here focus specifically on B2B launch tactics, such as distribution channel fit and growth strategies.

Effective launch tactics

It may sound silly to say, but the effectiveness of Launch Tactics are primarily determined by launch strategy. For launch tactics to be effective it is essential to not be "barking up the wrong tree" (Hart & Tzokas, 2000). With the right strategy determined, tactics should align the type of product, and customer needs to determine an effective way to distribute the product. Furthermore, advertisement plays a role in shaping the perception about the product and influence the purchase behaviour.

Distribution channels strategy, fitting need to product

The distribution strategy is the set of plans, channels and activities through which the product can reach the customer, it functions to materialise growth by getting the product in customers' hands, and thereby fulfilling their need. A broad range of strategies can be chosen, from dealerships to self-service. The decision what strategy to choose depends on the complexity of the product, and service needs of the customer. Dealerships and sales are fit for more complex and larger transactions. While hybrid or self-service strategies are fit for less complex, higher volume, lower transaction cost purchases (Beard & Easingwood, 1996; Tyrväinen & Selin, 2011; Ford, 2017). Enterprise sales focusses on closing complex and large sales deals, while the new product-led growth approach allows for rapid and scalable growth also in enterprise solutions, but requires a complex customer journey orchestration.

To understand distribution strategies it is important to understand why and how organisations purchase products. Organisations are a bunch of people, processes and equipment that together create products and services that deliver value to their customers. The demand for equipment (products) is thus derived (Lilien, 2016). Products are purchased to be able to run processes faster/cheaper/better, and be better able to serve their customers as we have seen in the launch strategy chapter (Christensen et al., 2007).

Organisational purchase behaviour and sales-led growth

Because products can touch upon the jobs of many people, and processes, risks and complexity arise. This results in organisations creating formal purchase processes, and using more economic and rational decision making criteria (Grewal & Lilien, 2012; Lilien, 2016). The risks associated with a purchase are dependent on the importance, complexity, uncertainty and time pressure associated with the to be purchased product. Depending on the amount and relevance of risk associated with the purchase, organisations will involve more stakeholders in the purchase process, require stronger relationships with their suppliers and might require formal decision making (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Johnston and Lewin, 1996).

The traditional organisational purchase process takes the shape of 1) need recognition, 2) determine characteristics, 3) establish specification, 4) identify sources, 5) request proposals, 6) evaluate proposals, 7) select supplier (Johnston & Lewin, 1996). Organisations want to improve, but risks and stakeholders should be mitigated. This is where the buying centre and complex purchase processes arise.

The purchase process thus adapts to specific purchases. The group of stakeholders and process involved in the purchase, are called the buying centre. The buying centre can be defined by (1) the vertical involvement, meaning the number of organisations hierarchy levels involved, (2) lateral involvement, meaning the amount of divisions or functional areas, (3) extensivity, meaning the total amount of involved stakeholders, (4) connectedness, or strength of the connection between the involved stakeholder and (5) centrality, in terms of purchase manager influence. High-risk associated purchases need the involvement of a higher hierarchy, while purchases influencing many departments need the involvement of more divisions. Knowing who is involved in the purchase is essential to be able to determine a marketing plan, and close a deal. The importance (to the company) of a new product, and what stakeholders it touches provides some insight into the probable composition and influence of the buying center (Johnston & Bonoma, 1981; Mattson, 1988).

Strategic selling by Miller and colleagues (2011) shows how to approach complex sales processes. First buying influencers (buying center stakeholders) need to be identified. These are economic buyers (determine final financial fund release), technical buyers (screen suppliers and make recommendations based on requirements), user buyers (judge potential impact of the product), and coaches (vote for you and help to gain internal support). Second, for each buyer should be graded on the basis of influence on the purchase process, and both personal wins and business results should be identified. Knowing all wins and results for each Buying influencer forms the basis for a proposal, next to understanding their attitude towards your product in relation to competitive alternatives. Only after all of this is known a proposal should be made. By identifying Buying Influencers, rating their influence and wins and results Strategic Selling helps to manage the complex sales process, and make better more effective proposals.

Consumerising organisation purchase behaviour and product-led growth

The more traditional, buying center oriented purchase process still holds for many products. But a new growth strategy is starting to emerge, which fits very well with SaaS products, namely Product-led growth (PLG). PLG utilises a new type of B2B purchase behaviour where complex customer journeys, based on own research and free experimentation, influences the purchase decision (Lingqvist et al., 2018; Bush, 2019). Leveraging this new purchase behaviour is fruitful for those who can get it working, as it sidelines the traditional, complex and costly purchase process.

PLG requires adjusting the product onboarding and value delivering, while taking into account customer purchase processes and focussing on leveraging the product's value creation moment. For example, Slack and Notion are better with your team. The onboarding (growth strategy) helps you to get to value, urges you to increase adoption and then monetize your usage (Peak, 2021). Product-led growth can be a very lucrative, cost-effective and extremely scalable growth strategy. The key is having a very clear onboarding journey, and critical clear understanding of the value creation by the user.

Generating leads and framing the product

Customers don't get to know new products all by themselves. Advertising and promotion function to inform new customers about the product, it's values and manifest the brand/positioning in the mind of the customer. Effective advertisement and promotion help to guide customers throughout the marketing/sales funnel from attention, interest, consideration and sales. Promotion and advertising send signals which influence purchase behaviour of customers, this can be done by communicating the added benefit, but also mitigate risks. The message should be adjusted depending on the customer's innovativeness. Innovators should be targeted with exclusive innovation signals. Mainstream customers should be targeted with security signals. Furthermore, startups specifically should try to shed the impersonal image and increase trust. (Kuester et al., 2018). Advertisement and promotion help to influence the purchase behaviour by creating awareness, interest, consideration and sales.

2.4 SaaS influence on product launch

Customers, competition and market characteristics determine the overall aspects of the launch. Software-as-a-Service or SaaS are software products delivered through the cloud and offer a standardised set of functions to customers. (Xin & Levina, 2008). But characteristics of SaaS, attitudes of customers towards the technology and environmental conditions can influence the product launch.

Unique product characteristics

Since SaaS products are cloud-based, their architecture provides them with specific characteristics that have benefits and disadvantages from a functional and customer point of view. SaaS offers unique accessibility over the internet; the product is accessible from anywhere, anytime, within and between organisations. Because of the cloud-based nature and shared accessibility, unique opportunities for collaboration are made possible. Furthermore, SaaS infrastructure is natively scalable and dramatically reduces the cost of scaling for customers. Instead of owning servers that need to be maintained, customers buy licenses to specific functions they need, reducing investment and operational cost risks. SaaS provides the opportunity to update applications without the required input of its users continuously. Resulting in the delivery of improvements and reduced innovation time. Fast deployment of a SaaS product reduces the implementation complexity for organisations and shifts the focus from service need towards perceiving the product's benefits more directly (Martins et al., 2016; Gallardo et al., 2018). Product launches that use the accessibility, collaboration possibilities, fast updating and ease of implementation set themselves up for product advantage over non-SaaS solutions.

SaaS Achilles heal

Because of the cloud-based nature, trust in data security is a weak point of SaaS. SaaS products can be categorised by the amount of monotony and strategic relevance to core customer processes. Products that are easily standardised and have low strategic relevance are best suited for SaaS adoption. These products use native scalability but stay away from the increased perceived risk of products that work in the cloud. (Benlian et al., 2009). Understanding how far customers are willing to go and to aim to support the right 'criticality' of business processes with the new product is key to understanding the adoption attitude of customers towards the new product.

Customer-fit for SaaS

The characteristics of the customer's organisation influence its attitude and decisions around adopting innovations. The diffusion of new SaaS solutions within organisations can be defined in three stages of diffusion; intention, adoption and routinisation. Each phase has unique factors that influence its success.

The intention to adopt SaaS is influenced by the organisation's IT capabilities, infrastructure and top management support (Martins et al., 2016; Oliveira et al., 2018; Gallardo et al., 2018). Fewer factors influence the actual adoption of SaaS. The strongest influencers are top management support and relative advantage (over other solution types and competitors) (Martins et al., 2016).

SaaS launch take-aways

Important to take away that for organisations to adopt SaaS, few things need to be in place, while others improve adoption odds. IT infrastructure and capabilities to implement need to be in place. While fit with the current architecture, top management support and perceived advantage improve the odds of adoption. Strategic relevance needs to be taken into account since this increases the need for reliability and security while it might scare away less innovative users to use the product or increase costs for the vendor to mitigate the risks to persuade customers.

2.5 Startups develop product launch plans

The previous chapters provided the outline for a product launch, from strategic decisions to tactical execution. The literature is written from an academic perspective and does not help in practicalities and daily operations. Therefore startup practitioners literature is researched. The first stages of a startup are explained, methods discussed and specific limitations of a startup that need to be taken into account.

Startup launch phases

Reading the last chapters, you could have thought, "startups are all about launching new products?". And quite frankly, it could be said they are. But they do it mostly in small teams with limited resources and are completely new to the market. That startup approach focuses on first evaluating value for the customer and then scaling. In line with launch strategy literature. The "Fit" concept used by startup practitioners are helpful to evaluate startup -and thus launch- progress. Three main stages are defined. Problem-solution fit, product-market-fit and Business-model fit (Osterwalder et al., 2014).

Problem-solution fit is achieved when a set customers, with an important pain and a fitting solution is made and evaluated,

Product-market fit is achieved when market interest is evaluated by happy and recurring customers.

Business-model fit is achieved when the product is both profitable and scalable.

Startup approach

The startup approach is characterised by an iterative process to developing and launching products with an extreme customer focus.

Customer Development and the Lean Startup both highlight the iterative nature of both product and customer development. Customer development proposes that startups develop a product that solves essential customer problems while simultaneously developing the sales roadmap and scaling only afterwards (Blank, 2004). The Lean startup proposes that startups design a vision and systematically debunk the most important product and customer assumptions through experiments rather than focus on a 'product' (Ries, 2011). At the same time, methods such as Value Proposition Design, Customer Forces and the Mom Test are approaches to embed a customer centredness in the product development. The Mom Test is a field guide for qualitative research and talking to customers to gather reliable data about new product ideas (Fitzpatrick, 2013). The Customer Forces model asks you to look into the customer's worldview and understand both customers' push/pull and friction towards a new product (Maurya, 2012). Value proposition design helps zone in on and clarify essential customer pains and product value (Osterwalder et al., 2014).

Startup limitations

Even though popular startup school preaches extreme customer focus and an iterative approach to product development, 11 out of 12 startups still fail (Startup Genome, 2019). Scaling too early is a leading cause of death, but underlying that scaling is a misinterpretation of need and product-market fit (Marmer et al. 2011). Furthermore, startups have to overcome key trust issues. Building dialogue with early customers, gaining trustworthiness, and gaining representation in the market are vital (Kuester et al., 2018).

2.6 B2B SaaS startup product launch criteria

This thesis specifically focusses on B2B SaaS startups, Lynk specifically. Lynk can be described as an early-stage startup as they have not yet evaluated their problem-solution fit through usage, or recurring happy set of customers. This shifts the focus of the to be product launch plan.

2.7 Key take-aways

Product launches exist out of Strategy and Tactics - Product advantage is the most important attribute for an effective launch and is shaped by aligning the product with customer needs, and deficit of competitive alternatives - Strategy is captured in product positioning which informs the development of launch tactics - Effective distribution mostly depends on the right launch strategy - Early-stage B2B sales depends on founders to sell the product - B2B sales processes can be complex and require the navigation of the customers' buying centre - A complete solution can be offered once all Buying infleunces are taken into account, and based on a product advantage positioning - Founders should do things that don't scale to convince customers to close hte deal.

SaaS product launch strategy

Startups have limited resources and credibility; developing a solid launch strategy is critical to the startup's success.

I. Essential job segmentation

Researching customer jobs is a critical step in better understanding customer needs and evaluating current solutions. Segmentation based on customer jobs forms the basis of solid strategic analysis as it grounds the startup into the worldview and needs of the customer.

II. Understanding competition

Current solutions used by customers are the frame of reference for customers and the basis for the right strategy. Product common ground, expected functionalities and attributes need to be understood to form product superiority. While evaluating the misfit between customer needs and current solutions form the basis for shaping product meaningfulness. All product launches should aim to achieve product advantage both through superiority and meaningfulness.

III. Evaluating SaaS fit

Startups should evaluate risks perceived regarding data security with customers to reduce adoption bottlenecks while considering current IT infrastructures used by the target customers. Furthermore, Startups should narrow down the customer segment to fit companies with top management support to help reduce friction to adoption.
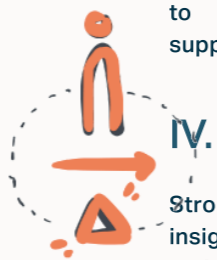
IV. Sharpened positioning

Strong positioning helps to transfer strategic insights into actionable insights for both sales and product development. Effective positioning clarifies customer segmentation, competitive alternatives and response and the value proposition while considering SaaS fit.

Early-stage startup B2B sales

Startups don't take off by themselves; founders do. B2B startups have to navigate customers to their buying centre and develop a repeatable sales roadmap.

I. Focussed sales intensity

Sales partly is a number game; not every customer is interested in improvements, a sale can be stopped for many reasons, and working with startups brings risks. Therefore sales intensity and increasing focus are vital.

II. Navigate the buying centre

To close a B2B sales deal, all stakeholders in the customer's buying centre need to be involved and have approved the deal. User-, technical- and economic buyers need to be qualified and engaged. Having a coach is beneficial to navigate the customers' purchase process as they might provide valuable data and create support within the organisation.

III. Differentiative offer

The sales team should align customer-specific needs and competitive solutions to formulate a differentiating offer. To overcome credibility and risk perceived by customers, the startup should offer 'things that don't scale' to help persuade the customer to close the deal.

IV. Develop sales roadmap

Each customer contacted, navigated through the purchase process, and made an offer is rich in insights. The goal of the founding team is to develop a repeatable sales roadmap that a future sales/marketing team can translate into a growth strategy plan.

3. Assessing Lynk's launch practices

This chapter critically assesses Lynk's launch practices with the criteria synthesised in the theoretical foundation's chapter. Based on the assessment, an improvement plan is created for both strategy and early-stage distribution.

3.1 Product launch assessment approach

Lynk is an early-stage startup, and is going through a emergent, fuzzy, effectuate process of discovery and development. Measuring it's product launch practices is something that should be extrapolated from these activities. Lynk is reaching out to a broad set of customers with the goal to evaluate the possibility fo a pilot. The sales activities and customer conversations form the basis of the launch practice assessment using the criteria of Launch Strategy and Founders sales (detailed in chapter 2.6).

Method

Sales conversations are the primary data source, setup and processed as semi-structured interviews, guided by a topic list that whas adjusted based on the interviewee and context (See Appendix III). In total 19 companies were interviewed. With some companies' multiple interviews were held. In total 27 interviews were held. All interviews were recorded and relevant data transcribed. All data was anonymised to protect source identity. An overview of all relevant quotes and their codes can be found in Appendix VI.

The next two chapters show the analysis of the data through the lens of the evaluation criteria. Chapter 3.2 evaluated Launch Strategy practices based on segmentation, customer and competitive insights to evaluate the launch's product advantage. While chapter 3.3 evaluates the early-stage distribution practices based on B2B sales practices and the development of a fitting distribution channel.

"Document-heavy, project-based teams"

▲ Figure 7. Visual metaphor of the initial launch approach used by Lynk
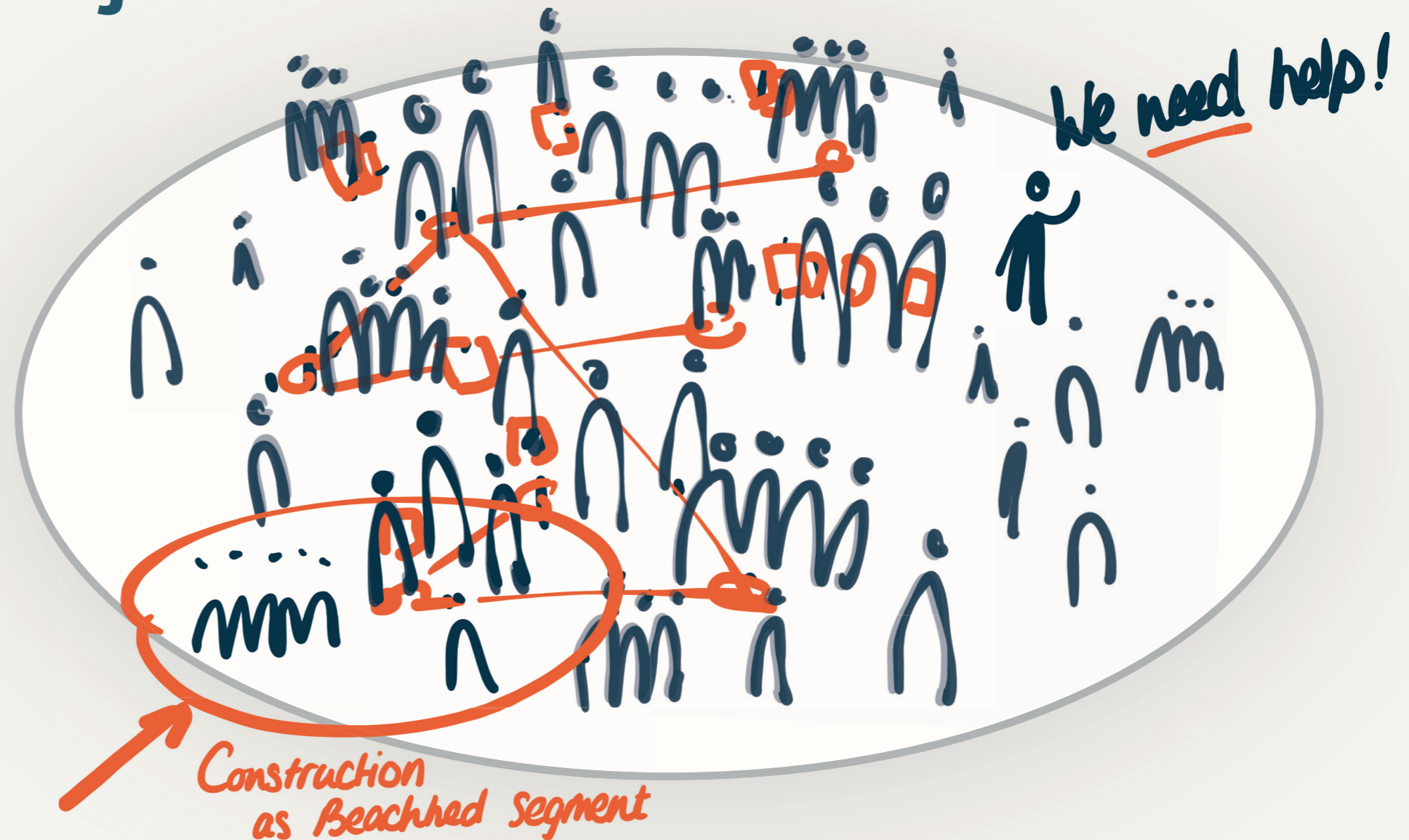
3.2 Launch strategy assessment

The first component of a launch is Strategy and assessed in this chapter. The broad value proposition showed that Lynk applied no initial segmentation. This shaped step one of the strategy assessment as an initial segmentation is determined. Secondly, for each customer segment, the essential jobs, challenges, and competitive alternatives are determined. From this thread of data, the basis for product advantage is approximated. Insights are grouped per segment and form a product advantage map which forms the basis for the Launch Strategy improvement plan proposed to Lynk.

Jobs segmentation

At Lynk, segments are abstractly defined and used. A broad customer segment is targeted based on the initial opportunity seen in the Construction sector. The product is targeted at segments that are characterised by "Document-heavy project-based teams". This broad segmentation was done to keep the team's eyes open for opportunities but does not help to analyse specific segments in detail because every customer segment has unique jobs, needs and wants. Therefore, step one of the analyses is to create segments that form the basis of launch strategy assessment.

Each construction company is unique. Some span from Development to Execution (Developing Contractors), while others focus on Engineering and Execution (General Contractor). Specialised companies, smaller ones, focus on specific tasks and phases, such as project developers who take ownership of the initial development of a construction project and orchestrate the design and execution phase. Companies can be seen as a set of processes related to the construction phase. The business processes are executed by teams who own a clear set of jobs. The development team within a developer and developer contractor can therefore be seen as the same. This forms the basis of segmentation based on jobs-to-be-done.

Five segments emerge from the 21 companies approached by Lynk. Each company is coded as P, as Participant. From the basis of the jobs-to-be-done (teams who have ownership of a part of the construction phase): (Real estate) project development, Tendering, Design/Engineering, Execution, and Consulting. Figure FIXME gives an overview of the segments and companies within that segment.

Segments

Development,
P11. Industrial Engineering Conglomerate
        385000 employees worldwide
P12. Real Estate Project Developer, 40 employees.
P15. Project management consultancy, 40 employees
P19. Senior Accountancy Expert

Consulting/engineering firm
P9. Global Engineering Firm, 6000 employees.
P10. Civil Engineering Firm, 1100 employees.

Tendering,
P4. General Contractor, 6000 employees.
P5. General Contractor, 450 employees.
P6. Infrastructure General Contractor,
        2250 employees.
P7. General Contractor, 3000 employees.
P8. Civil Engineering General Contractor,
9600 employees worldwide

Design/Engineering,
P1. Developing Contractor, 105 employees.
P3. General Contractor, 160 employees.
P4. General Contractor, 6000 employees.
P5. General Contractor, 450 employees.
P7. General Contractor, 3000 employees.

Execution,
P1. Developing Contractor, 105 employees.
P2. Developing Contractor, 100 employees.
P3. General Contractor, 160 employees.
P4. General Contractor, 6000 employees.
P5. General Contractor, 450 employees.
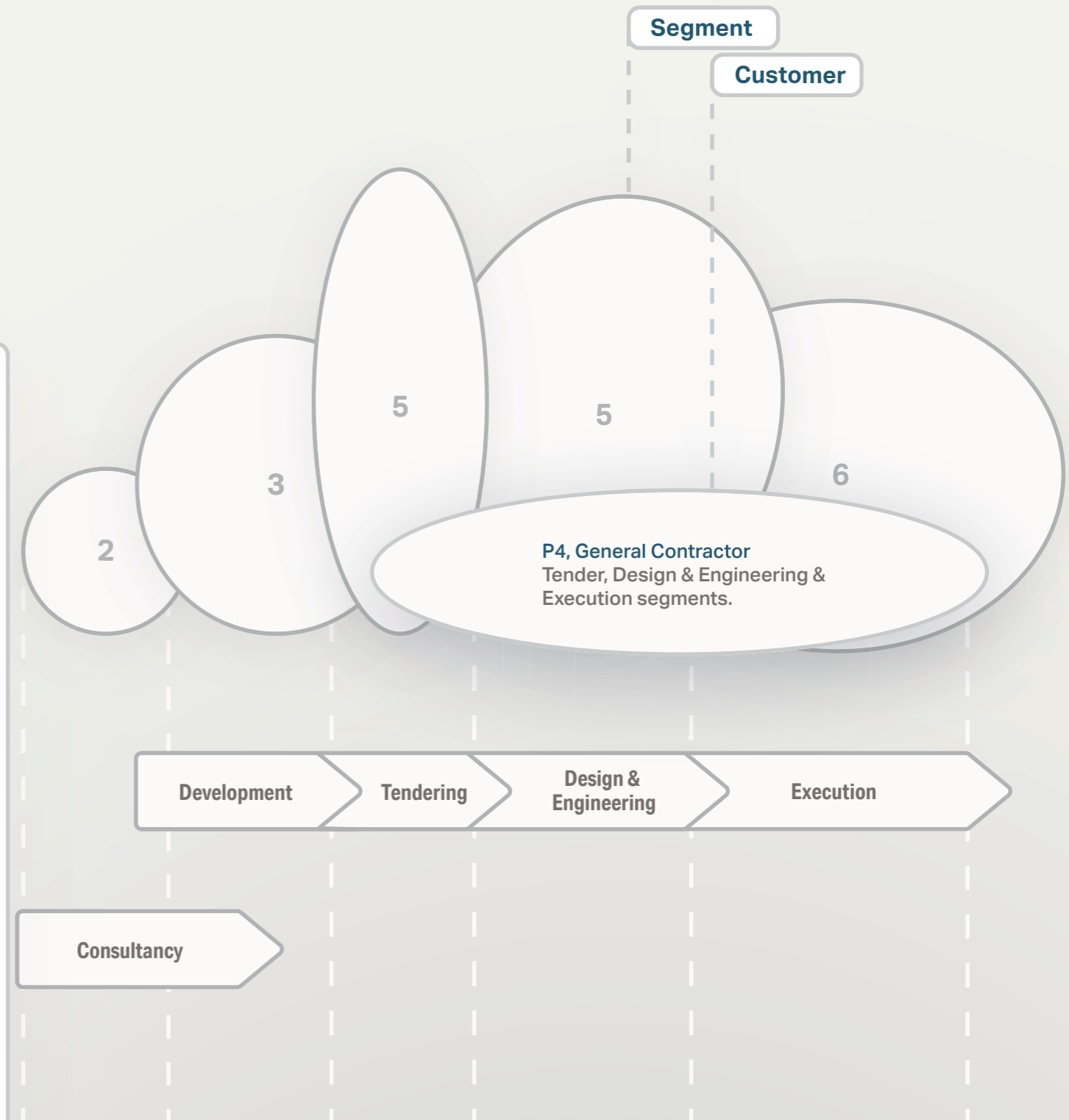
▲ Figure 8. Segmentation map based on jobs set per construction phase

Product advantage assessment

Each segment Lynk has targeted is analysed separately by bringing together the essential job description, challenges and competitive alternatives per segment. From there, an approximation of product advantage is made. Both product superiority and meaningfulness are approximated. Together this forms the analysis on which a direction for Lynk will be chosen.

Figure 3 summarises all segment assessments based on jobs, challenges, competitive alternatives and assesses the foundation for product advantage. The colour of the segmented circle highlights the amount of product advantage that is believed to be possible due to the value of the challenges related to Documents / Process workflow and competitive solutions available in the market. Power quotes from customers interviews emphasise the context and challenges in each segment. Finally, per segment, the workflow is schematically visualised to clarify the main jobs and highlight challenges with colour.

The complete segment analysis can be found in Appendix V.

Basis for product advantage
(Job, pain and unmet need)

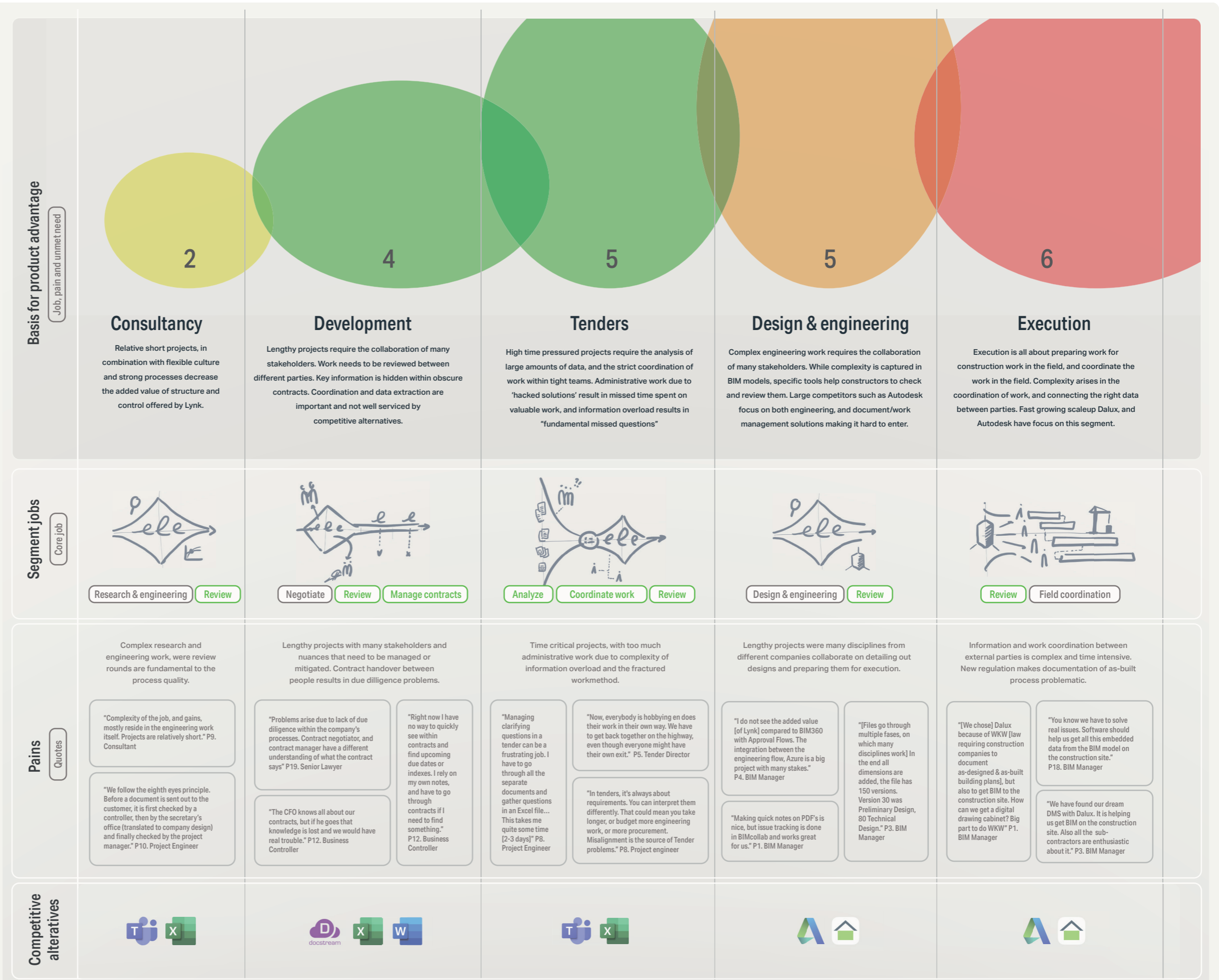| 2	4	5	5	6
Consultancy	**Development**	**Tenders**	**Design & engineering**	**Execution**
Relative short projects, in combination with flexible culture and strong processes decrease the added value of structure and control offered by Lynk.	Lengthy projects require the collaboration of many stakeholders. Work needs to be reviewed between different parties. Key information is hidden within obscure contracts. Coordination and data extraction are important and not well serviced by competitive alternatives.	High time pressured projects require the analysis of large amounts of data, and the strict coordination of work within tight teams. Administrative work due to 'hacked solutions' result in missed time spent on valuable work, and information overload results in "fundamental missed questions"	Complex engineering work requires the collaboration of many stakeholders. While complexity is captured in BIM models, specific tools help constructors to check and review them. Large competitors such as Autodesk focus on both engineering, and document/work management solutions making it hard to enter.	Execution is all about preparing work for construction work in the field, and coordinate the work in the field. Complexity arises in the coordination of work, and connecting the right data between parties. Fast growing scaleup Dalux, and Autodesk have focus on this segment.

Segment jobs
(Core job)

Research & engineering / Review	Negotiate / Review / Manage contracts	Analyze / Coordinate work / Review	Design & engineering / Review	Review / Field coordination

Pains
(Quotes)

| Complex research and engineering work, were review rounds are fundamental to the process quality. | Lengthy projects with many stakeholders and nuances that need to be managed or mitigated. Contract handover between people results in due dilligence problems. | Time critical projects, with too much administrative work due to complexity of information overload and the fractured workmethod. | Lengthy projects were many disciplines from different companies collaborate on detailing out designs and preparing them for execution. | Information and work coordination between external parties is complex and time intensive. New regulation makes documentation of as-built process problematic. |

| "Complexity of the job, and gains, mostly reside in the engineering work itself. Projects are relatively short." P9. Consultant | "Problems arise due to lack of due dilligence within the company's processes. Contract negotiator, and contract manager have a different understanding of what the contract says" P19. Senior Lawyer | "Right now I have no way to quickly see within contracts and find upcoming due dates or indexes. I rely on my own notes, and have to go through contracts if I need to find something." P12. Business Controller | "Managing clarifying questions in a tender can be a frustrating job. I have to go through all the separate documents and gather questions in an Excel file... This takes me quite some time [2-3 days]" P8. Project Engineer | "Now, everybody is hobbying an does their work in their own way. We have to get back together on the highway, even though everyone might have their own exit." P5. Tender Director | "I do not see the added value [of Lynk] compared to BIM360 with Approval Flows. The integration between the engineering flow, Azure is a big project with many stakes." P4. BIM Manager | "[Files go through multiple fases, on which many disciplines work] In the end all dimensions are added, the file has 150 versions. Version 30 was Preliminary Design, 80 Technical Design." P3. BIM Manager | "[We chose] Dalux because of WKW [law requiring construction companies to document as-designed & as-built building plans], but also to get BIM to the construction site. How can we get a digital drawing cabinet? Big part to do WKW" P1. BIM Manager | "You know we have to solve real issues. Software should help us get all this embedded data from the BIM model on the construction site." P18. BIM Manager |

| "We follow the eighth eyes principle. Before a document is sent out to the customer, it is first checked by a controller, then by the secretary's office (translated to company design) and finally checked by the project manager." P10. Project Engineer | "The CFO knows all about our contracts, but if he goes that knowledge is lost and we would have real trouble." P12. Business Controller | | "In tenders, it's always about requirements. You can interpret them differently. That could mean you take longer, or budget more engineering work, or more procurement. Misalignment is the source of Tender problems." P8. Project engineer | "Making quick notes on PDF's is nice, but issue tracking is done in BIMcollab and works great for us." P1. BIM Manager | | "We have found our dream DMS with Dalux. It is helping us get BIM on the construction site. Also all the sub-contractors are enthusiastic about it." P3. BIM Manager |

Competitive alteratives

▲ Figure 9. Product advantage map, assessing the ground for Product Advantage in each segment

3.3 Distribution assessment

The second component of a product launch plan is distribution and assessed on B2B selling and distribution channel fit. Lynk's sales intensity is intense enough to create data saturation in three segments. That says a lot. Because of the lack of Strategic focus, more intense sales efforts need to be done. Furthermore, Lynk lacks a structured process to disover and learn from customer conversations, resulting in a loss of insights regarding strategy and distribution channel improvements.

B2B selling assessment

The sales conversations held by Lynk are analysed using the described B2B selling criteria defined in chapter 2.6. The most important insights are, 1) Lynk should focus their sales efforts on the most promising segments, 2) more clearly integrate all buying roles in conversations, 3) embed better problem discovery and learning processes in sales conversations to inform both better Strategy and Distribution activities. In appendix XV the more qualitative analysis of the sales assessment can be found.

Intensity

In total 81 companies were spotted and added to the sales backlog. From February until the end of July 19 companies were reached out to, of which 11 showed interst, 2 were considering the product and evaluating other options, 1 turned into a sales. In total 38 conversations with customers were held. Of which 27 discussing the product (which informed the strategic assessment of the previous chapter). These conversations are long ongoing processes, but the snapshot provides a clear overview of the current state of sales, and customer outreach.

Navigating buying centre

Of the 19 companies, 3 companies were advisors, and 16 prospects for the product. At these 16 companies different types of buyers took part in the sales conversation. At 3 companies all types of buyers were part of the sales conversation. At 3 companies only user- and economic buyers were part of the conversation. At 7 companies only user buyers were part of the conversation. At 1 company user- and technical buyers took part, and at 1 only technical buyers took part of the conversation.
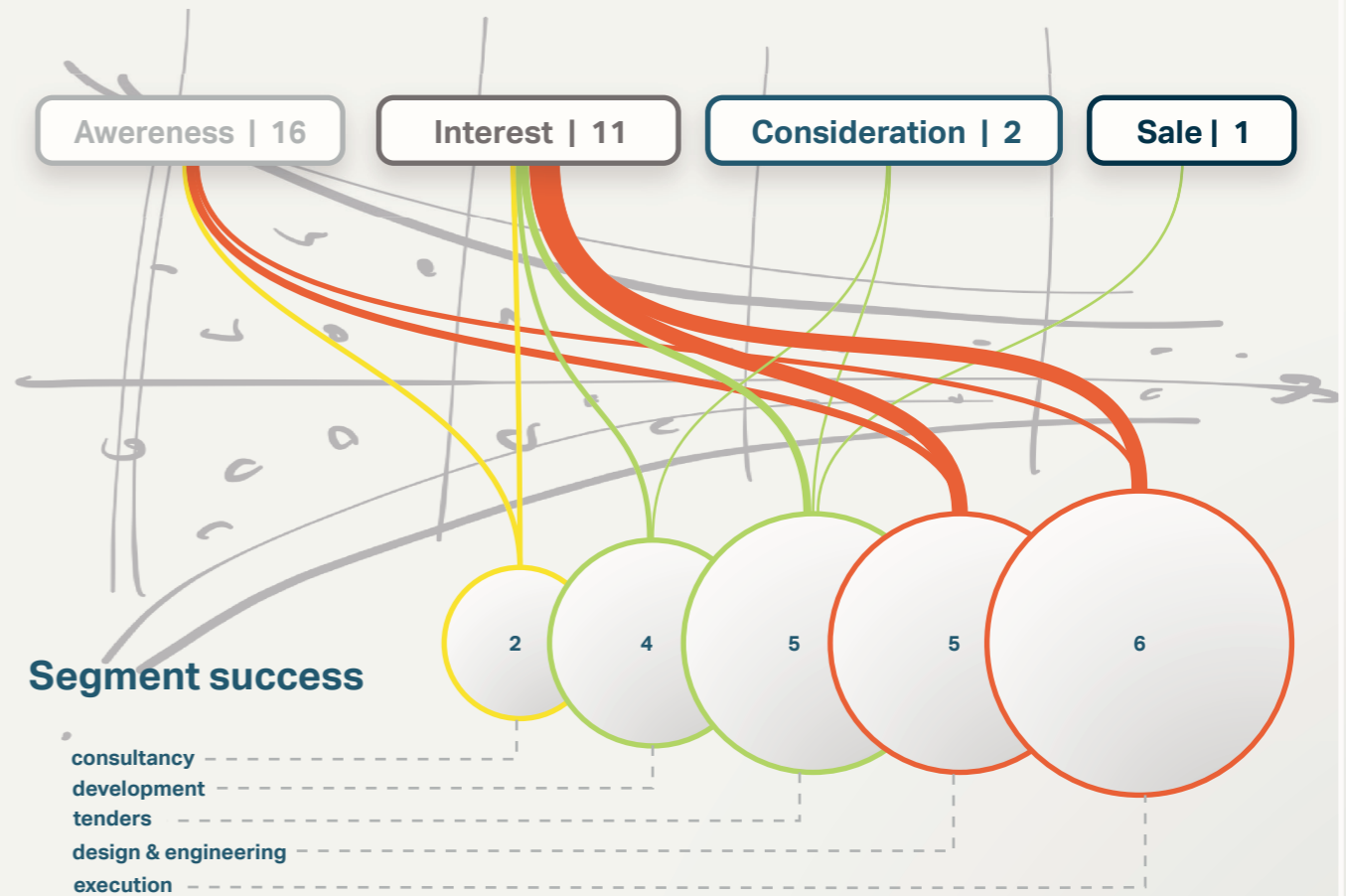
Differentiative offer

A offer is only made in the interest stage, if a match is spotted. And a differntiative offer can only be made if user need, product value, and competitive offers are understood and taken into account. The success rate of closes mimic the the product advantage described in the previous chapter. Of 11 companies in the interest stage, 2 progressed towards the consideration stage. Both were part of the Tender segment. 1 progressed into a sale and has verbally agreed to set up a pilot. The other a final discussion with the Tender team, and technical buyer is setup. Furthermore, no clear 'things that don't scale' were offered to customers.

Developing a sales roadmap

Lynk is not systematically developing a sales roadmap and is currently adjusting presentations per customer. Which on itself is good, but learnings about types of buyers and how to effectively navigate the buying centre OR more importantly, learnings about the product value are lost in the fuzziness of conversations.

Sales funnel

colour indicating amount of product advantage, as assessed in the previous chapter
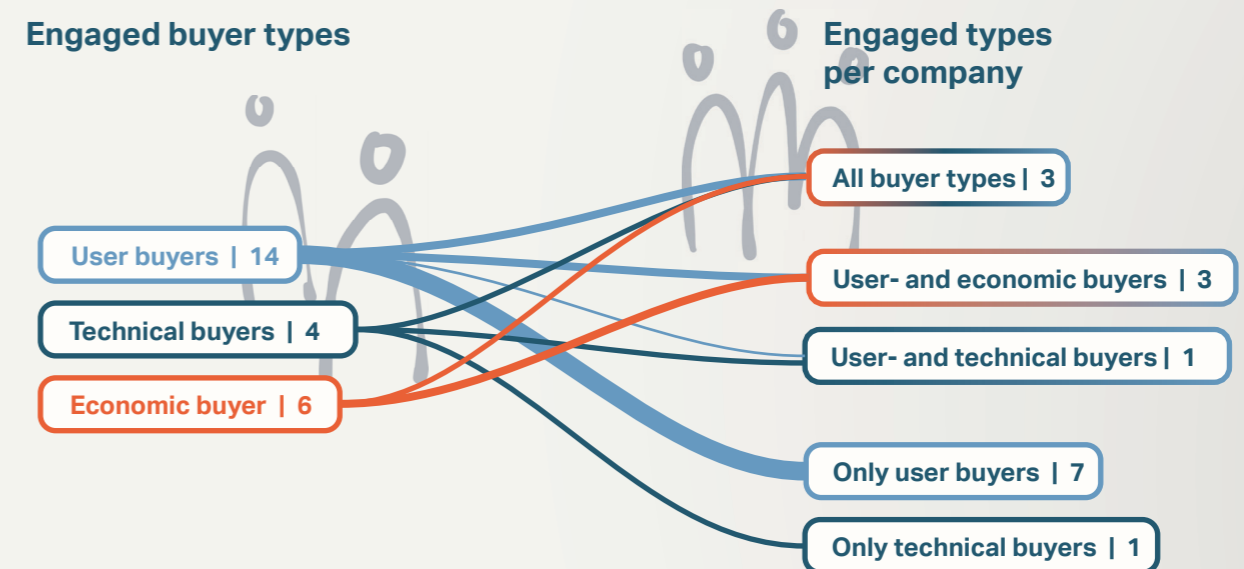

Awareness | 16   Interest | 11   Consideration | 2   Sale | 1

Segment success

| | 2 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 |

consultancy
development
tenders
design & engineering
execution

▲ Figure 11. Sales funnel progression per company, clustered by segment type

Navigation of buying centre

Engaged buyer types

Engaged types per company

User buyers | 14

Technical buyers | 4

Economic buyer | 6

All buyer types | 3

User- and economic buyers | 3

User- and technical buyers | 1

Only user buyers | 7

Only technical buyers | 1

▲ Figure 10. Buying centre engagement clustered per buyer type

Discovery & learning deficit

Deeply understanding customer jobs, needs and pains

Although sales 'skills' are important, surely in B2B because of the complex purchase process and not a single final decision maker. For sales to be effective it needs to have the right starting point 'positioning'. As the previous chapter has shown Lynk applied no explicit segmentation, the cause of this seems to be twofold. First it is believed that staying broad will help to stay open to opportunities, while on the other hand Lynk seems to have an extreme product focus in customer conversations which results in shallower insights regarding underlying customer needs, pains and understanding of competitive alternatives.

Interviews were organised around product features or asked around specific pain points, without specifically asking why something would be valuable. Second, feature requests of customers are always taken serious an no higher level evaluation of these features in relation to customers their underlying need is checked.

What seems to be happening is that the focus of sales and demo's, and trying to reach the customer as fast as possible, while 'closing the deal'. While the underlying needs, pains and blockers for customers are not well understood. Lynk is also very aware of not trying to loose credibility with customers which might inhibit asking more in-depth questions, and asking 'why' if a customer explain some of their work. Furthermore, due to the inexperience Lynk has in the construction sector, the team is not known with the ins-and-outs of the work itself and looks at the problems customers on a process level, this makes it extra important to do ask deeper to understand customers. The product focus, walking around of asking deeper is inhibit's Lynk from more systematically developing the product positioning, and being able ot make a differentiative offer.
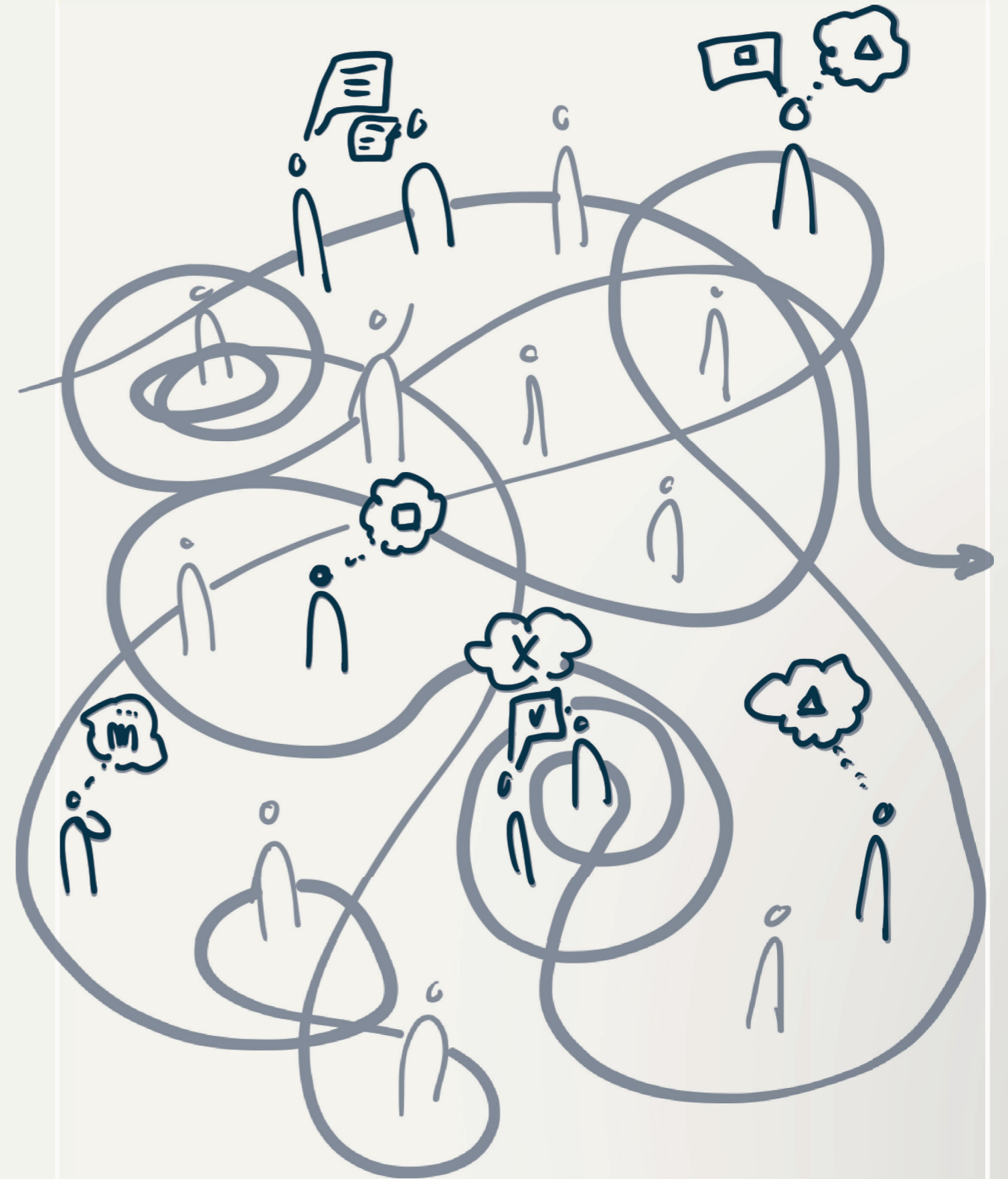
▲ Figure 12. Metaphorical visualisation of talking to 19 companies, without clear segmentation

3.4 Launch plan improvement plans

This chapter's purpose was to create a critical assessment of Lynk's current launch practices. The assessment showed that to launch more effectively Lynk can improve both Strategic and Sales practices. Chapter 4 describes the strategy improvements, Chapter 5 develops an improved sales/discovery approach.

Chapter 4

Developing a Niche Launch strategy

The assessment in chapter 3.2 shows that Lynk does not have a clear product superiority or meaningfulness advantage in its current broad target segment. Applying more focus towards the segments that show potential for product advantage will set up the launch for increased success. Two segments stood out in terms of potential for product advantage: Tenders & Development. A sharpened positioning should be developed that focuses on clarifying the product advantage to customers. The positioning forms the basis for improved sales.

- Develop Niche positioning
    - Tenders
    - Development
- Shape product advantage

Chapter 5

Embedding discovery and learning into sales

The assessment in chapter 3.3 shows that the broad launch strategy has an effect on Lynk's sales practices. Sales are practised intensely but is lacking focus. By sharpening the launch, strategy distribution will also improve. But apart from the launch strategy, Lynk might improve their sales practices by better navigating customers their buying centre and targeting the most important decision-makers with a differentiative offer. Second, Lynk might strengthen their discovery and learning process from customer conversations by more systematically discovering needs, pain points and friction and turning them into insights for both strategy and distribution.

- Focussing sales on Niche segments
- Improve buying centre navigation
- Improve discovery and learning

3.5 Key take-aways

The emperical research evaluated Lynks current launch practices using key assessment on launch strategy and founder sales - By analysing 27 sales conversations, with 19 companies the launch strategy and sales approach are assessed - Lynk is using a broad launch strategy and results in a lack of product advantage and sales effectiveness - Two segments show the potential for product advantage - Sales might be improved by better navigating the buying centre - Disocvery and learning might be improved to inform both launch strategy and the sales roadmap development.

3.7 Text 1, barking up the wrong tree

This third longs text shows how the rubber meets the road (or not in this case) and how abstract strategic marketing concepts come into play in real customer conversations. This is the moment my understanding of product advantage, and the sales process fell into place.

Context

The text shows a customer conversation with a customer who was actively looking for a new DMS.

Through warm-contacts I had gotten in touch with a Project Coordinator who I asked if he could share some of his knowledge regarding Project Coordination and Document Management Systems. He apply responded yes, and the conversation went quite in depth about what makes is work a success and what he was looking for. The current solutions they were using were not fit for the job. They used Box or WeTransfer to share files with Sub-contractors, and email to get in-between project progress reports signed. I showed some of the product, and told we were also working with other Construction companies. He was very interested and said they where actively looking for a new DMS system. Great! The moment for me to shine I thought.

Text

A meeting was setup to discuss the product with more team members, two more. The Head of Development & Operations, and Technical Manager (BIM Manager). My coach proposed to start from the beginning, tell about our story and product vision. I happily agreed.

I prepared a product demo with my warm-lead, setting up a the right roles, approval flows and preparing some documents in Lynk that he had sent over to make the demo feel more fitting. I also prepared a pitch, which I mainly based on conversations I had had with another Developing Contractor who said we should look into linking all different tools throughout the workflow as a spine. Based on the earlier conversation with the coach, that would be a great fit I though. Project Coordination and the connecting of workflows between teams. Just a few weeks earlier one of our other customers had made a business case based on Lynk. The business case showed that our product could result in 25% time savings, while also reducing failure costs, in Tenders. That seemed valuable and quantitative metrics to use in a pitch. So I decided to start the pitch with it.

I got to go to the customer their new main office. It was nice to meet people in person again. Entering the building I got treated by my coach, who guided me to the meeting room. The boardroom. The other two walked in just as I got seated. We started of with a quick chat, and I was trying to connect my laptop to the screen through a Barco clicker and noted that I had done a design assignment for them.

I had opened the presentation, and we started with a brief introduction. Then we started with the presentation, and I had taken the added benefit forwards to start with, stating '25% time reduction in tenders', and ' the missing half of SharePoint'. They didn't really give a response. Not sure what I had expected, I felt a bit nervous. Then I also noted that I hadn't positioned myself very smartly in the room. The screen was at the front, I was positioned in the middle of the table. The other attendees had to switch looking to the screen, looking at me, looking at the screen, looking at me. This didn't help with making eye contact, getting the flow of the presentation going, doing the demo. Well then... I thought.

I continued the presentation, shared our story, our vision and shifted to the Demo which I had prepared together with my coach.

They asked, 'and how would I be able to track the status of 'verzendbrieven'? A new concept I had not heard of, I felt myself dropping back a bit.. mmh this is unexpected a whole new use case? Asking how he would imagine this to work, he explained. "Well it's like an email, or like the old ways a letter, where all information is secured, and stamped so you know what is send to who and when. But also you should be able to see the status of the message, has it been opened etc.". No we don't have that exactly, I show go back to the demo and show a way you would be able to solve this, by using folders, permissions and workflows. mmmh he replies. It feels your competitor is further ahead with this. I somewhat agreed, and the conversation fell a bit still.

They continued to ask, how long have you been building this? With how many are you? Are you doing this full-time, or next to your studies? I had to think hard to respond to the last question, as I know continuity is important for companies.. I said, most are working full-time, some part-time, finishing their studies. Fuck I thought, I knew I should not have said that. For us, being sure that your product will deliver is important. "We have started in the garage, but now have 100 employees, we need to make sure" the Head of Development responded. Your competitor has business cases, and can show how the product will be used.

I asked some questions about the further process how they would come to a decision. He said they were talking to multiple vendors, asking for demo's, would make a short-list and discuss with the director, then that would go to the board to give the final go.

The conversation went quiet. I didn't know what to ask for a next step. I summarised our conversation, shared that we might not be the best fit for their use case because of the importance of business cases but would love to learn from them, maybe we could do a session together to understand their need better? They somewhat agreed, if that would help us maybe we can look into something like that. I felt this conversation was going horrible, and wanted to run away.

We friendly rounded of the meeting, shaked hands and thanked each other. My warm-lead guided me to the door and wished me good luck today. I was happy it was over, but felt a blanket of disappointment and shame fall over me... This conversation was horrible. What did I do? Why did I just pitch, not listen? Why why why. This sales pushing thing is not for me. How do you do this?? I felt a bit envy toward Ruben and his smooth sales conversations..

Reflection

This text shows both strategy and distribution coming in one. Where unclear strategic positioning resulted in mixed product advantages, and my own sales skills lacked to help the customer navigate their decision making process.

First of all, I made a major interpretation mistake by taking the value proposition of tenders and using it for another customer. Where tenders care about time, this customer doesn't. Even though I had started from the basis of competitive alternatives, I did not understand the underlying problem or process they wanted to improve.

In the conversation I made a major mistake by starting with a pitch, and focussing on the demo, without understanding the needs of the new people I was meeting. Looking back, I should have started the conversation by first understanding who I had in front of me, and clearly understanding their needs and perspective on the product they were looking for.

The conversation setup as I had, did aim to create a clear product advantage, but it didn't at all because of the mixing of data between segments. And after I had set the conversation in the wrong direction I got stunned but I did not correct and tried to understand their needs better.

4. Shaping product advantage

This chapter provides the improvements that should help to increase the product launch success by creating Product advantage, through a Niche launch strategy. These positionings form the basis for launch Tactics improvements proposed in section 5.

4.1   Shaping effective positioning

This Niche launch strategy should help create a 'beachhead market' for Lynk (Moore & McKenna, 1999). Which serves as a steppingstone for further market expansions. Making the market smaller should also help to increase Lynk's influence, by reducing competitors and focussing their efforts. Niche launch strategy is summarised by a smvall segment, high product advantage, innovative product and market- and technology driven organisation (Hultink et al,. 1997).

Taking a customer's perspective as starting point

Positioning has a confusing connotation, what is an 'effective' one? So before we continue it will help to further define it, and make it a bit more practical. The purpose of positioning is to help the company, to translate strategy into multiple aspects of the business such as sales, service, product and advertisement. It is about helping translate strategy into tactics. This means, it should guide the company in understanding the strategic direction, but provide enough room to provide their own input.

Second, good positioning helps customers to understand the product, see its benefits and values. Strategy is internal and abstract to help the company create direction and customers don't care about that. Positioning is about helping customers to understand your product, and putting it in the best light to show its advantages that make the offering uniquely compelling and 'obviously awesome' (Dunford, 2019). In short, "positioning is an act of designing a company's offering and image so that they occupy a meaningful and distinct competitive position in the target market's mind (Kotler, 2021). Starting from the customer's worldview is essential in creating an effective positioning as it helps customers to understand what the offer is.

In the increasingly occupied, and competitive landscape, taking a sustainable position is hard. Sliding scale characteristics such as 'faster' and 'cheaper' are not sustainable, competitors can easily move closer, and thus reduce contrast and eventually the convincing power of the positioning. To counter this, absolute characteristics can be taken into a contrarian positioning. e.g. 'automatic' cars instead of 'manual', or 'crystal clear' instead of 'transparent'. The best to do this is to USE the competition as a contrasting background, e.g. the competition is manual, we are automatic. There is no in-between (van der Vorst, 2019). Making this bridge, positions the product in relation to competition, creates a sustainable positioning and counters competitive pressure.

This positioning is captured in a 'brief' in which situation-problem/opportunity space- alternatives-value propositions are discussed. It is specifically NOT captured in a single statement to maintain depth and nuance. The format forms the basis for making sales proposals. But each customer is unique and their unique pains are discovered during the conversation itself, a flexible and informing positiong can help the sales person to create sharper more informated proposals on the fly.

This summary of effective positioning is used as outline to develop the Niche positioning in the following chapter.

- Creates the context for customers to understand the product, AND value.

- Clarifies the unique value compared to competitive alternatives, AND why that is important to the customer.

- Takes a contrarian positioning, by using the competition as background and uses absolute characteristics.

- Specifies the target customer, their specific characteristics, who would value this offering.

- Specifies the product category, that makes the unique value obvious to the target customer.

▲ Figure 13. Components of an effective positioning

4.2 Lynk Tender workspace

Core jobs

Incoming, sorting, analysing, formulating, question round, analysing, formulating, send-over.

In Tenders, 100+ documents are received at the start of the project, and within 2-3 months (8-12 weeks) a proposal needs to be drafted, reviewed, approved and styled.

In this short time pressure project, all documents need to be analysed according to risks, opportunities and clarifying questions need to be gathered. Throughout the project, risks and opportunities are drafted into project requirements which form the basis for the proposal, which is translated into a contract agreement.

"Tendering is 20% winning and 80% letting go. For me it's important to hand in the proposal on time, and deliver a well made package. Team culture is important for me, so we can make a well constructed package, and support each other." P8, Tender Manager

"Key to a tender is knowing what the customer wants, and translating that into a competitive package." P8, Tender Manager

Essential jobs

1. Analysing customer documents and determining requirements. The basis of understanding what the customer really is looking for.

2. Managing requirements, in such a way that customer needs are translated into the foundational blocks on which the project strategy can be developed.

3. Translating requirements into a winning strategy, and project proposal through research and engineering work.

4. Bringing together the research and engineering work into one proposal which can be send over to the customer.

Challenges

Tenders are projects that set the stage, and define the boundaries, for upcoming projects. It is all about analysing and interpreting documents send over by the customer, and translating that into a list of requirements which is translated into the proposal.

"Managing question rounds is something that returns in every tender, is key to success since it is the only way and moment to discuss key contractual topics. This is done manually, highly intensive and probably prone to mistakes." P5, BIM Manager - Tender Director

Within this process, the analysis of incoming documents, and question rounds with customers are key to project success. Even though project engineers, the employees that analyse the documents and need to draft the questions can have the feeling that "fundamental questions are missed" P8, Project Engineer.

All while Tender Manager are struggling with the fragmented way of working digitally, "Everyone is hobbying and doing their work in their own way. While in the end we need to get back on the same highway." P5, Tender Manager. For them it is hard to keep track of where the risks and opportunities are, which in term inform the project requirements.

In short, there is space for improvement in the way tender teams collaborate. Specifically the analysis of documents, creation of a shared tender understanding around risks/opportunities.

Competitive alternatives

Current competitive alternatives used by Tender Teams are primarily the Microsoft Office Suite. For file sharing (SharePoint), managing clarifying questions (Excel), and managing project requirements (Excel/Relatics).

Analysis of incoming documents happens on an individual level. A 'who reads what' list is made in Excel, or Teams, by the Tender Manager.

Project Engineers and Specialists analyse the documents in their own way, these files are 90% PDF. Notes are made on the PDF's, in OneNote, Word or Excel on people's own devices, saved locally or synced with SharePoint. Notes are therefore not easily accessible or searchable by others. Questions are noted in an Excel, all questions need to be documented manually, and maintained manually. This is a highly administrative intensive task. People are doing the same task twice, analysing documents and noting questions. While taking notes is fine, the key issues need to be brought together "back on the same highway, even if we have a different exit" P5 – Tender Director.

"I need to bring together all questions for the next round coming Wednesday, this is something that comes in between, and takes me quite some time, 1-1 ½ days…" P8, Project Engineer.

Even though the time-pressure in tenders is high and the Project Engineer should spend his time on engineering the winning strategy.

Risk/opportunities are translated into requirements and documented in working documents in Word. For larger tenders Relatics can be used, a Project Information Management Tool, which lets you note requirements, and link specific documents and notes. Tender Managers are not necessarily a fan of relatics, being time intensive and sometimes the purpose is not clear.

"With large tenders we have a System Engineer in the Team who manages Relatics. I am not sure what I think of it, for managing requirements over time it can be nice, but for me it felt like a 'put everything in and throw over the fence' solution." P8, Tender Manager.

The current system of personal notation in files (using Adobe or OneNote), Word as working document and Excel as clarification management works somewhat, but key issues arise.

Foremost, the management of clarifications in Excel is a high administrative task, which comes back every tender, and is key to success as it is the only moment that key contractual issues can be discussed with the customer.

Second, because of the high administrative effort of this task, less time can be put in valuable work as thinking out an effective strategy that might win the tender.

Value proposition

Tendering is about understanding customer needs and translating that into a compelling offer. Analysing and making sense of large amount of information that the customer sends over is critical in this process. However, because of the amount of information, and the embeddedness of it, managing this team based analysis is obscure and hard. Project members need to go the extra mile to manage this analysis and do administrative work which costs a lot of time. Even though they maintain the feeling that critical information can be missed, and/or is not clarified with the customer. All the while, the success of a critical tender depends on being able to write a sharp offer, by understanding the customer needs.

Lynk offers a Tender Workspace that helps tender teams to develop sharper tenders in less time, by creating a shared knowledge database. With Lynk tender teams can collaboratively analyse documents with easy, and create a shared knowledge database of risks, opportunities and clarifications. This helps to make sure no fundamental aspects are missed, while reducing administrative work. This is how Lynk helps to connect the dots and create more time to develop that winning bid strategy.

For Tender Director/CFO: Sharper tenders in less time. Lynk helps to reduce failure costs, by making sure no fundamental aspects are missed during the analyses of documents by building a shared knowledge database. Because of this shared knowledge database, administrative work is reduced, which in turn provides more time for determining the winning strategy or writing more tenders.

For Tender Manager: Get the whole picture, by creating a shared knowledge database. Lynk helps to bring all disciplines together in one shared workspace, and makes risks and opportunities better manageable. Create better teamwork, and write sharper tenders.

For Project Engineer: Lynk offers a Tender Workspace, that helps to reduce unnecessary administrative work and makes analysing documents and makes managing risks and opportunities a breeze. Make sure no fundamental aspects are missed, while creating more time to write the winning strategy.

Lynk
Tender Workspace

for, tender teams,
4-12 weeks
4-25 people
100 + documents
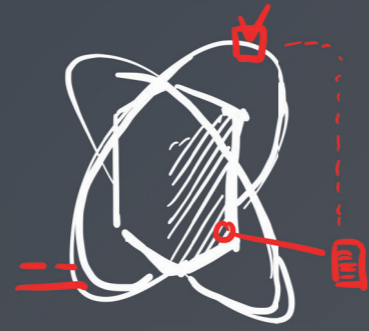
**Spend precious brain space on writing a winning strategy**

Turn your file cabinet into a shared knowledge database

Context

Tenders are high intensity, detail-oriented projects. A team of 4-25 people has to analyse and interpret 100's documents to spot risks and opportunities and decide if to continue with the tender and with what strategy the tender might be won. Tendering is teamwork, requires close coordination, and success relies on interpreting customer needs with risks/opportunities and translating that into a winning bid.
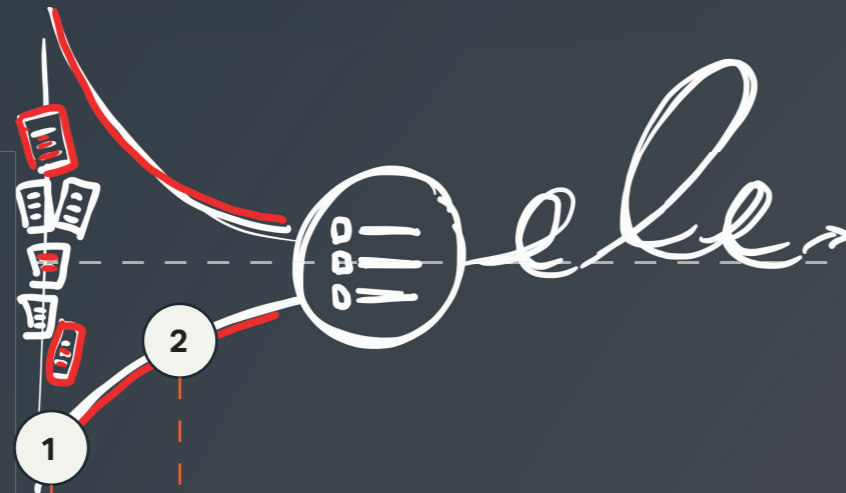
Time pressured, detail oriented projects

"Key to a tender is knowing what the customer wants, and translating that into a competitive package."
P8, Tender Manager

"Tendering is 20% winning and 80% letting go. For me it's important to hand in the proposal on time, and deliver a well made package. Team culture is important for me, so we can make a well constructed package, and support each other."
P8, Tender Manager

"In tenders, it's always about requirements. You can interpret them differently. That could mean you take longer, or budget more engineering work, or more procurement. Misalignment is the source of Tender problems."
P8, Project engineer

"You don't have time to give documents the right name in tenders." P5, Tender Manager

Challenges

Effectively analysing the incoming documents and spotting risks and opportunities is the first step in writing an effective proposal. But fractured work methods result in extra administrative work that takes up precious time while also obscuring the overall process for a Tender Manager to coordinate work effectively.

1 Analyzing incoming tender documents as Team

"The problem with a tender is that you get a WeTransfer with more than 100 folders full of files. You want to translate that directory to your own system. That is where the crux lies."
P4, BIM Manager

"Everyone is hobbying and doing their work in their own way. While in the end we need to get back on the same highway." P5, Tender Manager

2 Spotting risks & opportunities, managing clarifications
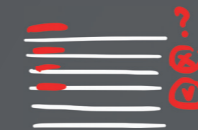
"fundamental questions are missed" P8, Project Engineer.

"It takes me two days to get the right questions together, while I should be working on developing the right strategy""
P8, Project Engineer.

"Managing question rounds is something that returns in every tender, is key to success since it is the only way and moment to discuss key contractual topics. This is done manually, highly intensive and probably prone to mistakes."
P5, BIM Manager - Tender Director

4.3 Lynk contract management workspace

Core jobs

Real Estate and Construction companies run on Contracts. It could be said, any organisation runs on contracts. But contracts in the Real Estate and Construction sector span a long time, and need to be managed continuously. Furthermore, due to the rise of UAV-GC contracts, they are becoming more complex and nuanced between projects. These contracts have due dates and indexes require work or prices to be checked. Contracts are organisation level agreements that many people within the company have to work with. Contracts are the result of a negotiation about work to be done. Once the negotiation has come to terms, the contract is drafted and saved. Contracts are most of the time saved on a Drive somewhere. After negotiation and signing, the responsibility is handed over to someone else then the Negotiator, roles as Contract manager or Business Controller.

These people need to read and make sense of the contracts themselves. This means reading through the contracts, although most of the time not the whole contract can be read. The contract manager makes notes, in their own system, and sets out to manage the agreements captured in the contracts. Meaning checking on work, due dates, and adjusting prices within contracts, indexes. Or any other type of time/work/quality related term within the contract.

Essential jobs

1.   Project terms and agreements are negotiated and iterated upon by stakeholders, key project terms are captured in contract.

2.   Contract is shared and signed between all relevant stakeholders, making it a binding agreement.

3.   Transfer contract to operations, who will set the contract in action and aim to deliver the agreed upon terms.

4.   The business controller checks on project status and outcome continuously to mitigate any eventual risks to make sure the project is a success and agreements between parties are kept or revaluated.

Challenges

First, agreements within contracts are obscured within text. Contracts are saved as PDF's somewhere on a local drive. This means Contract Managers need to read all contracts, and distil the due dates, indexes and expiration dates themselves. The problem with these notes is that they are 'detached' from the source file, and obscured within all the separate documents. If in one year a certain index needs to be checked and adjusted, the contract manager has their own notes, but probably goes back into the contract again.

"The CFO works here for 8 years, he knows all the contracts. I work here for only 2-3 years. He knows all the data. If he leaves, we will have a big problem." P12, Business Controller

"Agreements are hidden within PDF's, saved somewhere on our drive… This makes it difficult to act, and the chance you miss something is bigger." P12, Business Controller

"The problem with contracts is, most of the time you were not involved with negotiation so you don't know the ins-and-outs. What am I looking at? Then you always go back to the source again, I read the contract." P19, Senior Accountant

Second, within the handover moment between Negotiator and other stakeholders understanding about the contract can be lost, missed or altered. A lack of clear 'key information' and shared wording can result in wrong interpretations and wrongly executed contracts.

"The problem is we are missing a shared understanding of key criteria in which we manage the contracts" P12, Business Controller

"People read contracts differently. And that is where things go wrong. And then not having enough time to fix things." P19, Senior Accountant

Competitive alternatives

Companies that use Local Drive or SharePoint are used to store contracts. All relevant stakeholders can access them there. The problem with regular document focussed workflows is that duplicates easily emerge, and at the same time contracts can be hard to find due to the folder structure organisation.

"With the current way of working it is sometimes confusing where to find the right file. Is it on SharePoint? Local Drive?, or Google Drive? And what is the latest version?" P12, Business Controller

Contracts are drafted and iterated upon in Word. Redlining is key in this process, as you want to be sure what changes where made in the contract. The flexibility Word offers is valued by its users, but document focus reduces trackability and findability in the overall contract flow.

"Contracts are started in Word, we need redlining to see all changes that are happening" P11. New Business Director

Signing contracts has multiple alternatives, from sending PDF's through mail, or using's tools like DocuSign to digitally send and sign the contract. Sending over files through email is hated by all, but DocuSign is not always the answer. As it only allows a waterfall signing flow this can hinder the more complex contract signing flow who needs multiple people to sign. One person not signing can block the flow completely.

"DocuSign isn't working for us. It is still only in waterfall approval flow mode. Meaning everybody has to sign one by one. If one person is on holiday, the whole flow gets messed up. We are trying Approvals in Team now. Not great either" P11. New Business Director

To manage contracts, Contract Managers make personal notes. This can be done in Excel or Word, any type of running document. Mostly Excel is used for financial and term agreements as excel does offer some date organisation functionality. The problem is that foremost, entries in Excel are disconnected from the actual contract, meaning when things actually have to happen

contracts still most of the time need to be searched for and read. Second, because it is an abstraction of the contract, errors, or misinterpretations can be made. Third, it is a personal document, not shared with the company, contract knowledge still resides with one person.

"I always make my own notes for contracts. This system should help me do that, and have a calendar that keeps me up to date." P19, Senior Accountant

"When a contract is finished, I want a management summary and notes with the risks so I can find it back later." P12, Business Controller

Value proposition

Contracts are critical throughout the business process. They capture the binding agreements between the company, and others. Information is currently captured within the contract documents and personal notes of employees. Contract knowledge is obscured throughout the organisation. This results in losses and frustrations throughout the business process, from operations to service. Risks are not seen, opportunities missed and agreements with partners not delivered.

Lynk offers a shared Contract Workspace, that helps to transition towards more data-driven contract management. By labelling documents, and clauses, information within contracts become actionable, and each employee can create their own view on the contract information to fit their work need. For example, to; identifying how many contracts are within certain stages, or easily extracting all upcoming indexes with a due date next month. This way Lynk helps to transition from a document centred way of working to a data-driven way of working.

Because of the little data gathered, and less stakeholders talked to throughout the contract management process, no clear proposition statement to each stakeholder could be made. This needs more research.

Lynk
Development Workspace

**Contract Management in,
development projects**

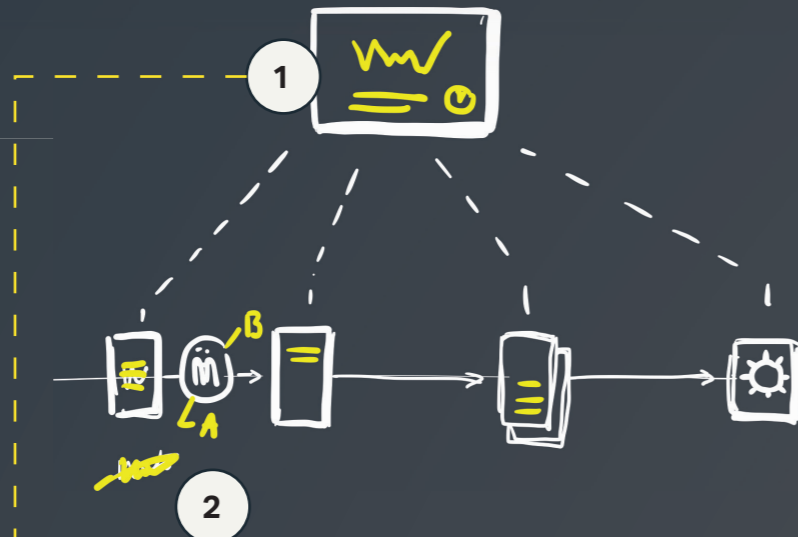**Make contracts
actionable**

**Accessible shared
contract database**

Context

Companies and projects run on contracts; they are the written agreements of all collaboration between parties. Contracts are living documents with indexes and due dates that require management or mitigations. These contracts are negotiated by one person, managed by another, and changed by another.

1

2

Contracts are the final agreements of projects

"The CFO works here for 8 years, he knows all the contracts. I work here for only 2-3 years. He knows all the data. If he leaves, we will have a big problem." P12, Business Controller

"Construction projects are phased projects with bonuses and penalties. You want to be able to act on those." P19. Senior Accountant

Challenges

Contracts lack a shared language between stakeholders; this results in misinterpretations and missed risks, causing project failure costs. Furthermore, obscured data makes contracts tedious to understand and take action on them. Contracts need to be read every time, over and over, while looking for the same information.

1 **Obscure contract information**

"Agreements are hidden within PDF's, saved somewhere on our drive… This makes it difficult to act, and the chance you miss something is bigger."
P12, Business Controller

"The CFO works here for 8 years, he knows all the contracts. I work here for only 2-3 years. He knows all the data. If he leaves, we will have a big problem." P12, Business Controller

2 **Missing common language**
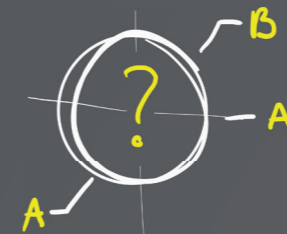
"People read contracts differently. And that is where things go wrong. And then not having enough time to fix things." P19, Senior Accountant

"The problem is we are missing a shared understanding of key criteria in which we manage the contracts" P12, Business Controller

"The problem with contracts is, most of the time you were not involved with negotiation so you don't know the ins-and-outs. What am I looking at? Then you always go back to the source again, I read the contract."
P19, Senior Accountant

▲ Figure 15. Visual positioning brief, Lynk as Development Workspace

4.4 Product extension

From filing cabinet to knowledge database

In co-evolution with the customer interviews and the development of these two niche positionings, the Lynk team further developed the platform's features. An extra layer was envisioned; this was not part of the thesis design activities but is important to note, as some of the new positionings lean on this added functionality.

On an abstract level the two segments of Tenders and Development, a similar user pattern was found. Both jobs contained extracting information captured within PDF's and would benefit from different views and filters on the extracted information.

For example, where Tender teams have to analyse documents, they annotate and make notes based on information captured inside PDF's. The purpose is to clarify customer requirements and find risks and opportunities in the information that can inform the Tender bid strategy. While in Development companies, Contract Managers notes that they would like to have an overview of all different due dates around date x, from all contracts. Or have an overview of all financial obligations still open for this book year. This serves the Business Controller in the company to have an overview of all obligations.

For both jobs, the current solution is excel, in which information is noted manually, in a sense copied from the original document. As shown in both positionings, this results in administrative effort and is prone to mistakes.

The team at Lynk developed a suite of features that helps companies manage this information more efficiently and creates the 'knowledgebase' that the positioning proposes. It significantly expands the functionality and is also hypothesised to expand the product advantage for both segments.

The feature is made up out of a couple of components:

Labels – on documents or inside PDF's on comments/annotations.

Viewer – extracting information from all files, taking different shapes table, calendar, Kanban.

Filters – showing only a select portion of documents/annotations fitting requirements.

Figures 6 to 8 show mock-ups of the new feature design, which is used to think through the UX flow, and in conversations with customers.
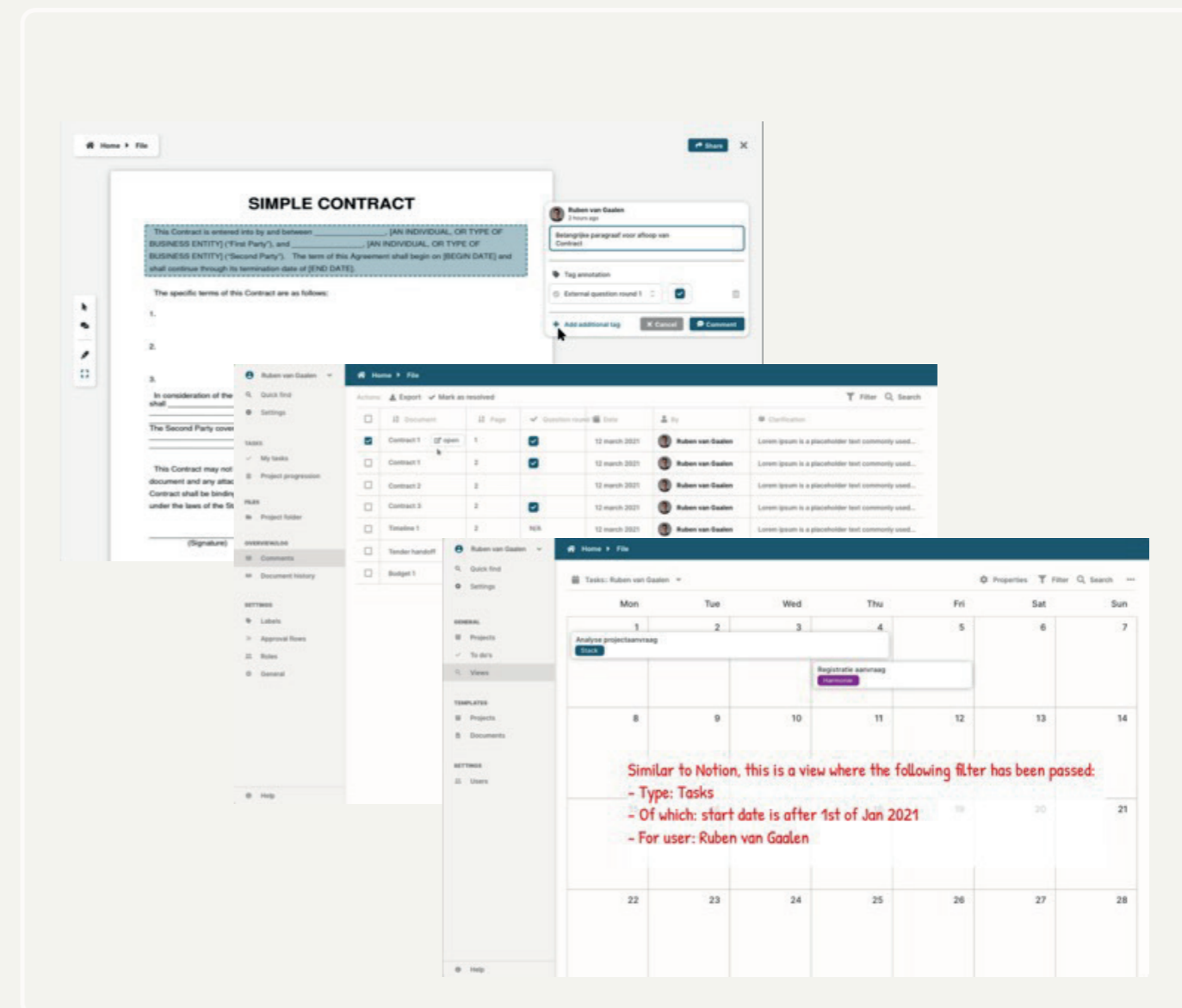
▲ Figure 16. Product extension mock-ups showing the 'shared knowledge database'

4.5 Key take-aways

Empirical insights are used as foundation for the design of two Niche product positionings - Tender segment has has high pain with analysing documents and managing requirements in due to high time pressure -

Lynk might be positioning as Shared Knowledge Database which helps to analyse projects faster - Development, business controllers have problems with obscured information in contracts that make them inactionable - Furhtermore the

4.6 Text 2, speaking the same language

This text shows the impact of the sharper positioning on the effectuate and social entrepreneurship proces. If you understand what you do, from the customer perspective, and can explain it in easy words, people might actually be able to help you.

Context

From the launch strategy improvement designed in section 4, two clear positioning came out. One focussed on tenders, and the other on development. Of the two, I personally felt tenders still had the most body to it, both in proof (way more data on tenders) and competition (no clear competition on tenders, while contract lifecycle management tools there are plenty). That made me use the tender positioning as main 'pitch' when talking about Lynk with other people.

In the morning after a CrossFit workout I met a new guy, who clearly resonated with the short pitch I could give thanks to this positioning.

Text

Since a few weeks I have been picking up CrossFit. Every two-three days I do a workout early in the morning around 8-9 am. It is a new environment and meet a lot of new people.

This morning at CrossFit I met a new guy. I introduced myself as a product/marketing strategist at my own startup, and briefly explained what we do with Lynk. Build software for tender teams to collaborate better, and make analysing 100's of documents that come in more easy to write sharper tenders in less time.

His eyes lit up, 'ah that sounds interesting, very cool'. Indeed tenders can get complex, we just work in SharePoint he pointed out. I asked what he did, he told he worked as Regional Sales Manager for P20 (an international shipbuilder). For the Caribbean specifically.

Well well. A completely different sector, but a very enthusiastic response I thought. I asked him about the tenders they do, what size? Some really large ones, naval and dredging tenders are 50+ million. Sounds interesting I said, it would be nice to talk to someone inside P20 about it.

He nodded. I was thinking the same he said. I think I might know someone, let me share you my email adres. If you send me a short introduction I will see if someone is interested.

After the conversation I just had a smile on my face the whole day. This is what I was looking for this part year. Being able to explain in such simple words, who we target, what we offer, and why that is valuable.

Reflection

This interactions shows how the updated positioning, -tender teams 100+ documents-, related with a problem -analysing those documents-, and contrasted against current solutions -excel & sharepoint- is effective to help people understand what you do, and see the added value. Even though the person themselves is not completely part of that context.

While the market sector of shipbuilder tenders is not really verified as potential sector to launch the product in, the clear positioning does open doors to communicate with others more clearly, and get warm-leads to someone who does own this problem of tenders at P20.

The interaction shows how entrepreneurship is a social and effectuate process as described by Sarasvathy (2009). And how the positioning functions as communication tool within this social effectuate process, as bridge to communicate the opportunity as described by Shane (2003).

5. Embedding discovery & learning practices

This chapter describes the early-stage discovery/sales improvements that were found in chapter 3. Due research and sales processes are expanded upon and captured in a single process, easily implementable for startup founders.

5.1 The paradox of strategy & sales

Chapter 3 showed that Lynk could improve their founder sales game, and should try to better managing the complex sales process as it is key to closing large customers they Lynk is trying to target. But next to sales, founder sales functions as another key component in early stage, they are the most important customer data source. Before formal growth strategies can be used effectively, founder sales should pave the road and find key customer needs and perspectives that can inform Strategy, and Distribution needs. The challenge for founder sales in B2B, as Lynk is struggling with is, 1) founders are biased in their discovery, having both extreme product focus and positivity – this hinders reliable data gathering, 2) complex sales processes in B2B cannot be underestimated, as selling to larger organisations take too much time and can result in dead startups – managing this complex sales process is a whole world on it's own. In this chapter a merger of both key Customer discovery practices, and Strategic Sales practices is proposed to provide a founder sales playbook and help founders to gather reliable data to inform Strategy & Product development, while at the same time laying the foundation for a successful sales process.

B2B Startups have to deal with complex purchase processes. This is because new products bring risks to organisations and products have a network of stakeholders who have benefits/risks and needs associated to the new product (Johnston & Lewin, 1996). Organisations utilise Buying Centres to assess and organise the process of new products. Key stakeholders assess the new product from all different perspective such as need, usability, technology, security and risks (Johnston & Bonoma, 1981). Navigating and influencing this complex purchase process is key to the selling of first products, and thus to the survival of the startup.

B2B Sales practices provide the methods and techniques to navigate this complex sales process. Miller, Heiman and Tuleja (2012) are one of the leading B2B sales approaches suggesting to 1) create win-win situations for both organisations, 2) create win-results, where each stakeholder has both Business- and Personal needs fulfilled, 3) Formulate a unique differentiating proposition that sets you apart from the rest, 4) progress the sale by getting commitment. Miller, Heiman and Tuleja (2012) propose that the most effective B2B sales differentiates itself from traditional sales by providing a differentiating position that sets the offered solution apart form all the rest of the solutions by connecting deep customer needs to the solution.

Sales thus needs a good positioning, and sales is thus based on the notion that a positioning is already present.

Strategy is hindered by finding reliable and true information about key aspects as essential customer jobs, key challenges, and competitive alternatives. While sales (distribution) is hindered with not having a clear Strategic Positioning defined. This is a paradox for early-stage B2B startups. Whereas Strategy and Distribution are separate notion in Launch literature, and functions in traditional organisations. In Startups the two merge. As startup you are developing the problem and solution space at the same time (van Oorschot, 2018), in a context where information is hidden in a network of stakeholders (Lilien, 2016). while also trying to find and convert customers that fit in your strategy to get those first 10 customers.

Lynk is experiencing this paradox first-hand. The whole process from gathering first customer data, going through all the sales conversations (Autoethnographic text 1 and the critical assessment in chapter 3) .

In the next chapter a new early-stage B2B founders' sales approach is proposed. The aim being to upgrade the early-stage founders sales practice, by both gathering reliable and essential customer information to inform Strategy, and make able to assess product advantage, while at the same time progressing the sales deal. First, we dissect the discovery process, and describe how to gather reliable data. Second, the effective B2B Sales process is explained. Third, the two processes are brought together to form the early-stage founder's sales process.

5.2 How to discover real needs

Customer conversations, and a due qualitative research approach is an important tool for entrepeneurs to navigate the fuzzy front-end of the startup process, critical to gathering reliable information about the problem, product and implementation context.

Source to understand and shape product advantage

The basis of product advantage as in depth discussed in chapter 4, is about being better at solving a important need than the competitive alternatives. To discover and define a product advantage the customers essential jobs, key challenges and competitive alternatives should be understood, in a nuanced and in-depth way.

But asking customers straight what their biggest challenges are, and what they value and what not about current solutions does not work. As interviewees and the interviewer are prone to biases. Customers will, 1) tell you what you are looking for, 2) be nice to you (don't want to say you are wrong), 3) don't know the right answer (Hall, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Maurya, 2018). Gathering reliable data through customers conversation vital to success, for both Strategy & Distribution but can be a swamp to navigate.

Gathering reliable customer data

Gathering reliable discovery data relies on three aspects, 1) the approach, 2) the interviewer, and 3) the interviewee.

Practical and reliable research approach

Understanding customers their worldview can be a messy activity, as many narratives, perspectives and levels of abstraction are intermingled in the data gathered through customer conversations. Due process, approach to interview and analysis are the way to gather reliable qualitative data.

Hall (2013) proposes a practical approach to implementing sound research practices in entrepreneurial contexts. Sound research comes down to one essential thing, covering your biases. Which Hall suggests to do by 1) following a structured process, 2) following protocol analysis. Understanding these aspects a bit deeper provide the framework for our founder sales handbook.

Semi-structured interview approach

Process wise Hall proposes to use a semi-structured interview approach with clear goals, while leaving space for paying more attention into special topics that might come up. The goal is to analyse the data and find patterns, that give insights and to determine how they influence the project.

Good research is about covering your biases. Design, sampling, interviewer, sponsor, social-desirability biases. These can be countered by, clarifying your personal goals and preferences, being mindful about the influence of the sample you talked to, influencing the participant by letting out personal opinions and over enthusiasm -be extra careful when creating report with new people-, making sure you evaluate every participant or source in the same way -by for example making them anonymous in your analysis and making interviewee's clear that honesty is important and there is no good-or-bad and their insights will be kept anonymous.

For analysis, it is important to bring in multiple people in the analysis as this reduces bias, while sticking to quotes and observations to come to close to reality as possible. Then go through all the data, while looking for patterns/clusters/ideas. Also look for opposite patterns/clusters/ideas to counter bias. And finally only after you have gone through all the data, start looking for larger patterns. Insights and influence on the project should be clearly documented, linking to the patterns and underlying quotes.

An open interviewer's attitude

As interviewer, you ask the question but also go in with a certain mindset. Having an active open mind is important to gathering more data, and creating more

reliable interpretations from that (Haran, Ritov & Mellers, 2013). An active open mindset is made up out of two dimensions and four criteria; Knowledge dimensions, 1) lack of dogmatism, and 2) openness to facts even if they contradict one's previous views. People dimensions, 1) a liberal attitude towards people, and 2) a refusal to judge others for their opinions (Svedholm-Häkkinen & Lindeman, 2018). Gathering reliable data starts with yourself, check in before and during a customer conversation; are there certain dogmas that influence my thinking? Am I actively searching for data that might contradict my views? Or am I judging other peoples their opinions, or for example their way of working and what they see as 'right'?

The key is to let go of your own assumptions and underlying values. The customer is king, business starts and end with the customer. They are the problem owner and decide what product they will use to solve their need. They determine what is important and what is valuable, understanding them is key to be able to formulate a product which fits, and therefor sells.

People lie, it is your job to make them tell the truth

Customers don't know what they want, or what they value. "If I had asked people what they want, they would have said faster horse" screams the over-used quote by Henry Ford. But it rings a bell. As entrepreneur your job is to understand what people are trying to achieve, and help them do it better/faster/cheaper (Ulwick & Osterwalder, 2016). Some basic research guidelines will help to ask better questions, and help your intereviewee to tell the truth, so you can get closer to reality.

Gathering life events, and understanding customer forces

Some basic attitudes as interviewer, 1) Talk about their life instead of your ideas. 2) ask about specifics in the past instead of generics or opinions about the future. 3) Talk less, and listen more (Fitzpatrick, 2013). If zooming

in on products, or workflows the Customer Forces model by Maurya (2018) is valuable. Push, pull forces set the customer in action. While inertia and friction, hold the customer in place, and increase the friction on maintaining usage. What is the 'trigger' for better (push)? how do they measure success (pull)?, what solutions are they currently using and what competitive alternatives do they know/are evaluating/have tried? And what do they like to not like about it? Also understand psychological barriers as inertia and friction. What is holding back people from change, and maintaining change? What attitude and behaviour specifically? (Maurya 2017; 2018). Talking about customers their life, and trying to understand the forces that make them want to improve and are holding them back are a better approach to gathering reliable data.

Different levels of knowing

Visser and collegues (2005) propose that people have different levels of knowledge. People might think differently about things than how they act on them, or how they feel or dream about them, what you learn from them depends on how the interviewee is probed (questioned). Uncovering the different layers are important sources of information that help to understand values, and wants. While understanding the friction between for example acting and dreaming might uncover blockages of change. Visser et al (2005) propose that generative sessions and observations form the basis of deeper understanding, it could be argued that if people explain their daily lives, and objectively go through their workflow also offers a peek into their world and may be seen as a form of observation. While questions like 'what if you had a magic wand and could change one thing about the current flow' accesses peoples imaginary and feeling aspects of their experience. Although this might be hindered from their verbal and imaginary skills, compared to the generative sessions as proposed by Visser and collegues (2005). The concept of different levels of knowing are valuable concepts in interviewing customers and to help to get to understand at what level you are gathering information from the customer.

5.3 Sales is not a pitch

Next to the proper research approach to uncover real needs, B2B founders have to deal with complex sales. Navigating this complex sales process can be obscure, frustrating and confusing. Organisations have multiple stakeholders that bring in perspectives about the product, and influence the purchase decisions. In this chapter the redline in effective B2B sales is drawn.

The salesman, and the Myth of selling

Traditionally sales is looked upon as this bravado job for macho people with smooth talks that persuade people and "always close". But purchase processes in B2B organisations are as we have seen complex, require the input of multiple stakeholders and can even have formal decision-making moments. Bravado and smooth talks only get you so far. Although good conversations rely on good 'report' or having a personal match between those in conversation. This is just the starting point.

Question and differentiation focussed sales approach

Complex sales requires nuanced and in-depth understanding of all customer needs, and a fitting proposition that creates a win-win situation. Miller, Heiman and Tuleja (2012) propose conceptual selling as approach to handle more complex sales processes. Compared to traditional sales that forces a solution through someone's throught by pitching and maintaining control of the conversation, conceptual selling is about understanding the customers concept of the problem, and competitive solutions and instead of pitching to offer a differentiative solution. Sounds like the outcome of an effective launch Strategy? It is.

The key to effective sales is, to be able to propose a uniquely differentiative and valuable solution for an essential job that helps the customer to achieve their goals.

Miller, Heiman and Tuleja (2012) propose that the B2B sales process should help the customer to make a decisions (figure x shows the mental purchase process customer go through). This is done by, uncovering the customers discrepancy between where they are now, and want to go. By understanding personal and business goals, and their perspective on current and competitive solutions a differentiative offer can be formulated.

Formulating a Complete B2B proposal

Before an organisation makes a purchase, it is important to have all types of buyers on board. High-over there are three types of buyers in organisation, 1) user buyer (evaluated the need, and fit of the product), 2) technical buyer (assess the technical fit with current systems of the company, and guards security), 3) economic buyer (guarding the budget). And finally a last purchase process influencer is the coach, or champion, this person votes for you, and is on your side of the team. The coach is important in providing important information that can help setup a differentiative offer. The best coaches are the ones higher up in the company order, resulting in valuable information, and more influence on the purchase process.

The differentiative offer takes in mind all perspectives of the different types of Buyers to gain organisation level approval, but is primarily focussed on the final decision maker. It is the seller's responsibility to create this coherent and complete offer, and to continue to talk to the different types of buyers.
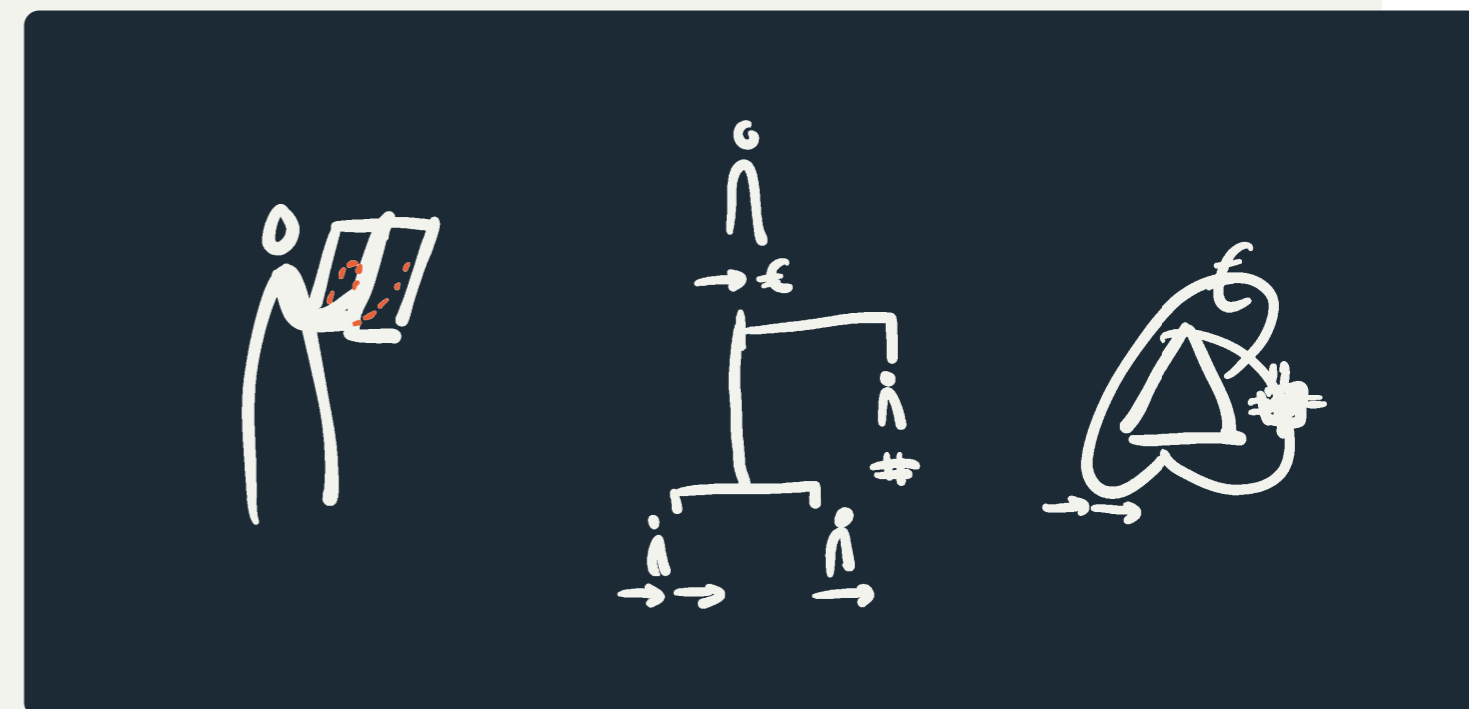
▲ Figure 17. Illustrations of main components of B2B sales

Navigating the organisational purchase process

Within the purchase process, conversations with all stakeholders should be made. Each conversation the customer might have issues, objections or show commitment. As sales person it is your job to have a next step in mind before going into a conversation. Keeping in mind that it is your goal to understand the customers view on the product, and gather information from all types of buyers. Commitment can take multiple forms, 1) time, 2) information, 3) credibility, 4) money. Not all are equal. It is quite easy for people to spend another meeting with you, while releasing funds is the final and most important commitment.

Sales literature goes into how to navigate this exactly quite well and is not further discussed in this thesis.

Building credibility from the get-go

In normal dealings credibility might be important, but in B2B relationships and sales is it critical. Since new relationships carry large risks, and the credibility you have as company, and person, are fundamental to the customer even wanting to continue the conversation. Building blocks of credibiltity are experience, knowledge, presentation and assocsiation (Miller et al., 2012).

Startups have a hard time with credbility because, before the first sale, there is no track-record. It is vital for startups to start building crediblity from the start, this can be done by first and formost having professional manner, becoming expert in the field, asssociating with experts and channel partners, aquiring fitting board members. But next to that it is noted that utiling personal network as ways to warm-leads is critical to overcoming the initial barrier. It is even noted that for startups, relationships to a specific market might be more important than the potential between markets. (Rehme & Svensson, 2011).
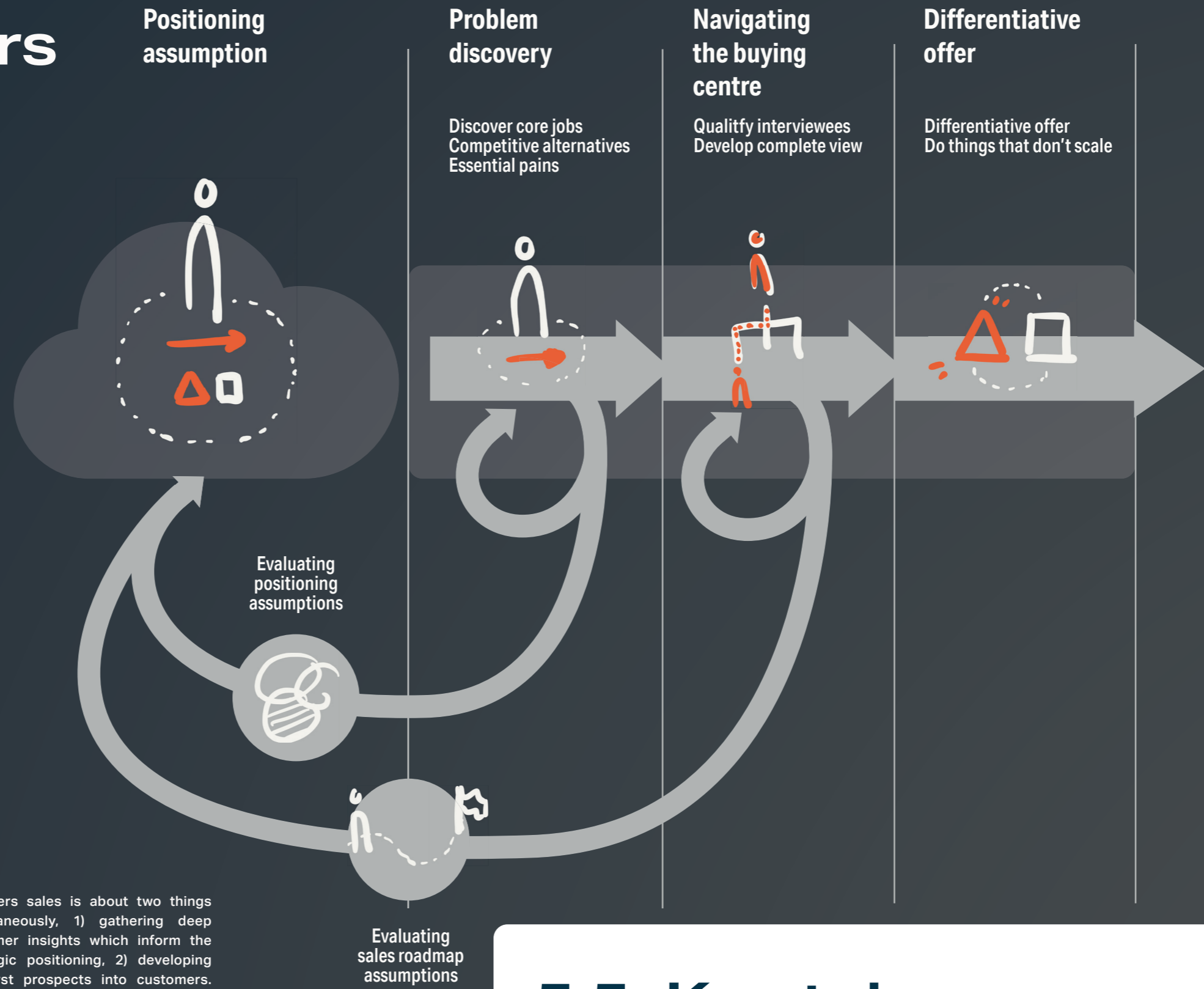
5.4 Founders sales

Founders are in a paradoxical situation. The problem and solutions space are both developing at the same time. The problem is somewhat known, as is the solution. And while sales is about progressing conversations with customers they can only be effective if a differentiative solution with a clear advantage can be offered. The previous two chapters showed the separate parts of discovery, and sales. In this chapter the two are merged altering the early stage of the sales to gather key information for both Strategic and Sales purposes.

Why founder sales is different

Where traditional sales expects you already have a complete solution, as early-stage startup you don't. Even though you might have a product, and an idea of the complete solution, there is still the potentiality for new understanding about an opportunity, customer and their needs. This changes the approach. From directly understanding the need for new product, to more deeply and as reliable as possible to discovery the current situation, essential jobs, competitive alternatives and opportunity for product advantage. If a clear fit between, need and proposal can be fitted, the sales process can be progressed.

Founders sales is about two things simultaneously, 1) gathering deep customer insights which inform the Strategic positioning, 2) developing the first prospects into customers. By taking this approach founders iteratively develop their startups Strategy and focus on product advantage while at the same time developing intial sales.

Positioning assumption

Problem discovery

Discover core jobs
Competitive alternatives
Essential pains

Navigating the buying centre

Qualitfy interviewees
Develop complete view

Differentiative offer

Differentiative offer
Do things that don't scale

Evaluating positioning assumptions

Evaluating sales roadmap assumptions

5.5 Key take-aways

The paradox between strategy and sales are highlighted in the startup context - Approach and techniques to reliably discovery real customer needs are highlighter - The B2B sales process is described, qualifying customers both problem and influence fit - Founders sales is proposed to implement learning practices in Lynks customer conversations.

5.6 Text 3, The right kind of uncomfortable

Letting go of 'control' in conversations, and starting from problem. Feels uncomfortable, but creates very rich soil for strategy and sales process.

Context

Conversation with lead Information managers at P4. P4 is a large general contractor with multiple daughter companies, these managers where head of ICT at the central ICT company who deliver software advice and consultancy to the daughter companies. Within the conversation the new approach to sales was used (chapter 5), and the Tender problem pitch as seen in Appendix IV was used to discuss the problem before showing a demo.

Text

After taking a spot in the meeting room they both introduced themselves in an extremely long fashion, talking about all their experiences with information management and challenges in the construction sector, how extremely unstructured and hands-on everything operates. Furthermore one of them mentioned how hard digital transitions are, not due to the direction, or the people on the construction field, but due to the 'thick middle layer' of people on the office. "We have been doing it like 100 years people say" so they continue to do so.

After the lengthy introductions we switched to the topic of the meeting, introducing Lynk. We started with a problem pitch to evaluate both the jobs, pains and discuss alternatives they might use. It was a great success.

The pitch turned into a lively discussion,

Starting to get common ground about the outcome the project functions for, get new business - lay the foundation for the project - and win only 20% and loose 80%. They agreed, knodding.

Then I went into the quotes, and this worked magic! They agreed with every added slided, even broadening the situation with their experience.

Question rounds in tenders are crucial, and the only moment to ask critical questions. Both knodded yes.

'Everybody is hobbying' > 'At one of our projects there wasn't anything available to help manage information flows. NOTHING'.

And wow this quote, 'I could be working on the winning strategy', wait what am I reading this right one looking startled? "NO!! SHOULD BE!, RIGHT!'.

Also, on the quote "You have an idea that fundamental questions are missing", one said "YES, and the problem is not even that. When you missed things, but THEN WIN IT. That is the start of real problems. Good luck."

The problem is, there is no way to effectively put down requirements, but also decisions throughout the project.

They kept coming back to, Were curious how we fit in landscape compared to other tools. What is the added value of your product over the other products offered? Where does it fit in?

We had an in-depth discussion linking to their introduction and how their current setup and vision of DMS is . How it would connected to their system. They clearly were technical buyers.

The meeting was drawn-out for some 20 minutes. We took longer than plannend, but they also seemed to like the conversation. Email contact was held some time later. Unfortunately they called off further talks, because due to limited capacity, their primary focus of projects is not tenders and "their vision for DMS's goes furhter" as they want to create a central data-management platform?. They did thanks use for our very used centred approach to product development. How nice.

Interpreting this is not as easy. Is there value for tender teams in P4 still? Did we get called of because the added value for tender teams is not clear yet? Or that our system does not connect to our current infrastructure as they were not primarily SharePoint based?

Reflection

Although this conversation felt 'out fo control' as Ruben and I discussed later, the focus on problem and letting them talk created rich ground to build on both strategy wise, and sales wise. It validated some of our thoughts and brought to light more of their thoughts regarding IT systems and the value it might deliver.

The text also shows how customers that understand and confirm the problems, and seem interested in the product might cancel further talks if the problem is not central to their companies operations. It shows how focussing both product and target customer are vital to selling effectively. Enterprises envision to have a single data-lake, if Lynk whises to tap into this vision a clear and valuable positioning is needed to convince customers to adopt Lynk.

6. Evaluating launch plan improvements

This chapter brings theory into practice by evaluating the two product positionings and founders sales approach developed in chapter 4 and 5. Recommendations for further improvements are distilled and summarised.

6.1 Evaluation in practice

The two niche segments chosen in chapter 3, were approached to evaluate the improved product positionings designed in chapter 4. The customer conversations were setup following the process described in chapter 5. The value proposition for each segment is evaluated, and new insights regarding implementation are found. Input principles are given to Lynk to help guide further launch strategy and product development.

Method

Conversations were planned for around an hour, and the sample group consisted of customers that were talked to in the previous conversation round and new ones focussing on Tenders and Development in the construction sector.

Interviews followed the script proposed in chapter 5, taking in mind the positioning for each segment as input and the following discovery first.

Interviews were recorded, and relevant data was transcribed and anonymised. The data were coded and analysed based on the concepts described in the literature review (chapter 2.2 and 2.4). From the coding and analysis the positioning and friction towards adoption per segment were evaluated.

The following chapters describe the insights gained per segment.Insights are supported by power quotes from interviews.

Sample group

Participant code, type of company (sales stage)

Development,
P3. General Contractor (advisor)
P12. Real Estate Project Developer (consideration)
P15. Project management consultancy (consideration)
P22. Real estate strategy consultant (interest)

Tenders,
P4. General Contractor (interest)
P5. General Contractor (sales)
P6. Civil General Contractor (sales)
P21. Urban Development (interest)
P23. Industrial Contractor (awareness)

Script

Interview script used with new customers.

Part 1: Discovery with customer -- Each customer was asked to introduce their company, provide an example of the type of projects they do, and go through their workflow.

Part 2: Evaluating pains and competitive alternatives -- Participants were asked what tools and processes they used within the projects, and what their experience was with these tools. Here probing questions were used to further specify the context, and experienced pain with the goal to quantify their needs.

Part 3: Demo and evaluation of product -- Lastly the product is shown to the customer in a demo catered to the specific answers, workflow and needs, that the participant just gave. This part the reaction of the customer is important, and a inquisitive attitude was taken. The goal is to understand what product the value might deliver in their workflow, and what might hold back the product from delivering the value.

Data lens

Product evaluation

Job-to-be-done
pains
Competitive alternatives
Advantage

Distribution evaluation

Buyer influencers
Target buyer

Distribution channel needs

6.2 Evaluating the tender launch plan

In the Tender segment product advantage is evaluated, but adoption friction increases complexity of distribution. As the product mostly creates value for larger tenders, corporates and large contractors are the ones that reap the most benefit. But due to their complex purchase process, and the risks associacied with Lynk, it is hard for users willing to try the product to setup a pilot. Adjustments to the product, positioning and sales roadmap are proposed. Positioning should focus more on security and early-adoptions might be found in more innovative segments and reaching out to tender directors in companies who primarily focus on generating business through tenders. Furthermore collaborations with channel partners such as resellers and experts might reduce the perceived risk associacied with Lynk and improve sales success. See appendix FIXME for the complete analysis.

Input for launch plan improvements

Risk is deal breaker for corporate customers, and care to formulate a response both product, positioning and disitribution wise will be critical.

Positioning

Lynk is positioned as Workspace, and shell over SharePoint. This results in high implementation complexity, and increased perceived risks due to connection to the companies SharePoint.Organisations perceive the data processed during a tender as sensitive, increasing the need for security.

Explore product adjustments that might help to reduce the risk and decrease implementation complexity. Either by decoupling features, or recuding the need for integration.

Improvements in positioning should mitigate the associacied risks -no system integration necessary- while emphasizing the value delivered by the product -better and faster analysis-.

Investigate risks associacied for other tendering companies, 1) Adjust positioning to take a less risk associacied position, and include more security signals 2) compare perceived risks between different sectors e.g. construction, maritime contractors, engineering contractors and target the most innovative.

Sales roadmap improvements

Customers do say, if the need is there, there is a way. But the way is long. It will be critical for Lynk to find early-adopters, meaning innovative Tender Directors who are willing to take some risk.

Qualifying leads on more innovative characteristics is adviced. Narrow down target segment to early-adopters, focus all sales activities on customers who fit in the niche segments of, 1) Companies who primarily gather new business through tenders, 2) Tender directors are innovative, and can allocate the budget themselves, 3) Are wlling to take a bit of risk.

Distribution tactics

Complexity of implementation of new software is a recurring aspect from customers. 1) Further investigating that 'culture' which is holding back new innovation. 2) explore resellers or experts that might help to decrease the perceived risk and help to access early-adopters.

Partnerships with channel partners, such as resellers and infleuncers (experts) in the tender segment might reduce the perceived risk associaciede with Lynk.

Launch evaluation

	Proposition	Evaluation
Target customer	Tender teams in any type of company.	Companies who don't have tenders as sole focus, see Lynk as too much effort to implement
		Tender directors are both user, and economic buyer.
Value proposition	Workspace that helps Tender teams to write sharper tenders in less time. Reduce administrative work analysing documents, by turning your file cabinet into a shared knowledge database.	"[Lynk] could create a flywheel effect of savings that help my people spend more of their bright minds on valuable work, and make their life a bit more fun." Tender Director P6-3.
Product	Lynk as workspace and shell over SharePoint. Differntiative: PDF annotator, viewer.	Changing workflow is hard for construction teams, due to routinisation of work approach and time pressure of projects
		Tender documents and communication about tenders are seen as critical information and require high security.
Distribution	Direct selling	Perceived risk, and implementation complexity require expertice.

Input for launch improvements

Focus on finding early-adopters in the form of innovative tender directors, in contracting companies that rely on tenders as main project source.

Double down on information overload, and smarter analysis of documents.

Investigate workflow of each tender participant in-depth and see if processes can be used in the design of Lynk.

Investigate mitigations of having critical information in startups cloud, or integration with internal systems.

Investigate experts and resellers that might help gain early-traction.

6.3 Evaluating the development launch plan

Development projects were researched on the basis of contract management. Two segments emerged, that of the business controller (accounting) and contract manager (development project), visualised in Figure 13. For development projects a reseller has been contacted and is interested Lynk. This has given the Project development segment a boost. This was also the segment earlier defined by Lynk and abandoned due to implementation complexity and too large risks for customers, but through collaboration with the reseller this can be mitigated. Furthermore, basis of common ground with competitiors was found in Revision Management of files. Lynk can take this into development and start to shape product superiority for the specific segment of UAV-GC Development projects, supporting the communication between the different stakeholders througout the project.

Customer evaluation

Adjusting segment understanding

The evaluation focussed on 'contract management by developers', but two segments emerged. One contract management job executed by business controllers, and the other throughout a development project by the developer, general contractor and experts involved.

Business control

One business controller was contacted to discuss the new positioning as shared contract database, and accompening features. There seems to be an added value of extracting information from contracts.

"This would really create a shared knowledge database, be my notebook for contracts" P14

But too little data has been generated to evaluate the proposition for this segment. The controller reached out to is a close friend of one of the co-founders. And after discussing the conversations, it was decided that the collaboration with the early-adopter would be played out but not more focus would be put on the segment. On the basis that if tenders and project coordination is critical information, contract information is even more so. Apart from that, the current sales processes with both Tenders and Development are further ahead.

Contract management

Projects in construction are done oftentimes under a UAV-GC contract, where specific responsibilities of a contract are spread out over the multiple stakeholders. Figure 2 shows the schematic process drawing of such construction project workflow. Within a UAV-GC project, the developer puts forward project requirements, and the contractor designs and provides proof of validation, the developer then in collaboration with experts such as technischians review the work delivered by the constractor. This loop continuous throughout the project.

Contract management within construction projects had verification from different sources. One from real-estate strategy (P22), a general contractor (P3) and from a reseller (P15).

Being able to easily coordinate workflows and creating rich decision-making and file change logs is also valuable in the project definition phase, and in government oriented projects, or when strict developers require due process. Coordinating this process is a pain in the ass the moment while people talked to have to explicit solution at this moment.

"According to the ISO way of working, first designs are made by the architect, then handed over to the technicians, then the developer checks it and only then we as execution team receives the files" P3-2

"Within the project definition phase for government projects strict processes need to be followed, and documented. This is now down quite.. hacked, resulting in it actually not being done, or just sparsely." P22-1

The consulancy and reseller P15 was contacted to discuss Lynk around these processes of contract management, and project coordination between differen stakeholders. This is the context for which the original DNA positioning was developed (seen in Appendix XI). When P15 was introduced to the updated features, making it possible to extract data and communication the reseller became very interested. This had started the conversation to discuss product specifics and their requirements. From this conversation and the insights.

When using workflows, revision managment is the other half that is essential. As changes are made by multiple people, over time, spanning companies, providing clear proof of the trackrecord. Competitive alternatives
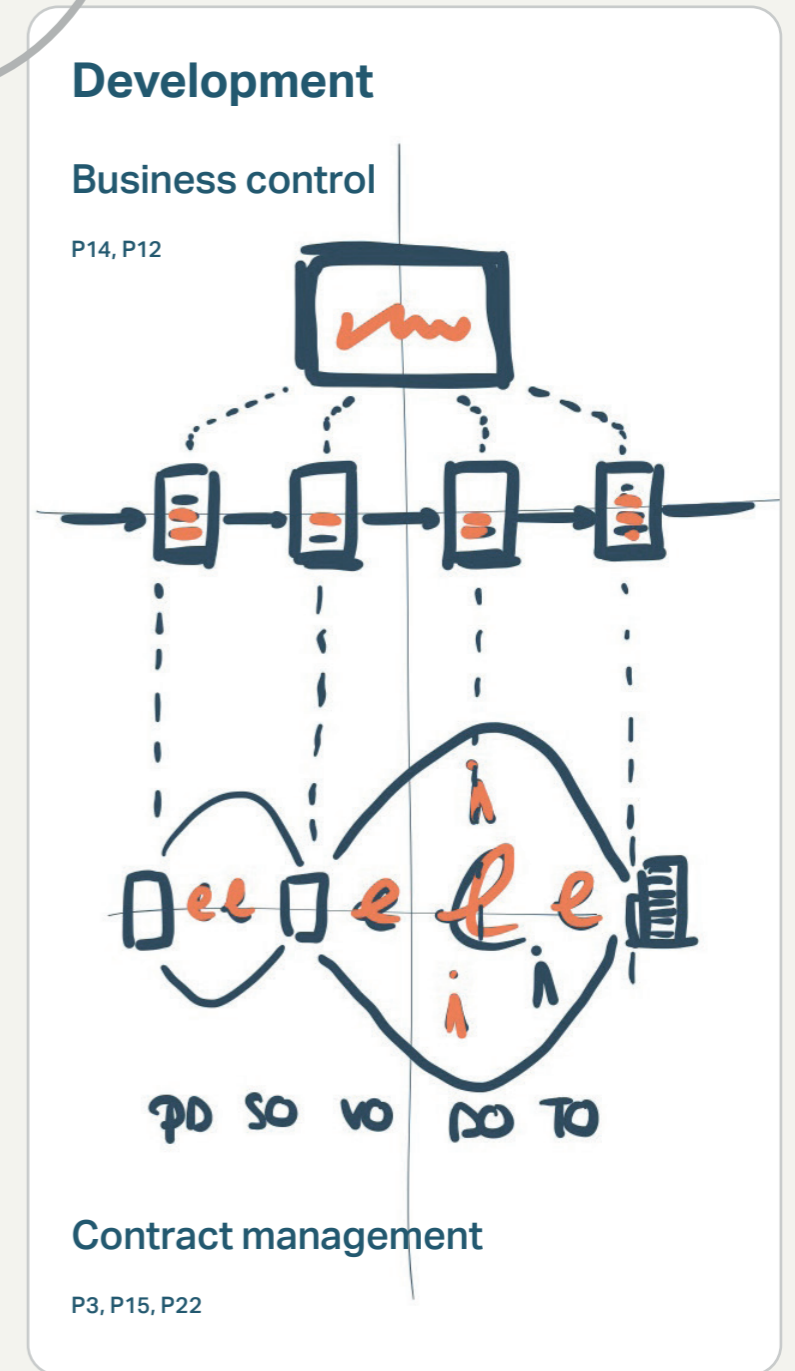
Development

Business control

P14, P12

Contract management

P3, P15, P22

Figure 18. Developer, contract management jobs

already offer this, it is therefor critical for Lynk to also get this feature, as the combination forms the common ground for customers to compare the product.

"Revision management of files is critical for us, you are lacking there." P15-2

"Being able to look back at the changes in a document, and the comments placed on each version is useful. Especially during the handover. Were mistakes found? Was there decided to continue? And why?" P3-2

Througout the project large reports are made (phasereports), and need to be reviewed or form the basis for planning the next phase. Throughout the project an ongoing conversation is going on between parties, disciplines and roles. Lynk should help to provide clarity in this spaghetti communication flow.

"Every two weeks there is a meeting with all project parties involved. Documents of the contractor are checked, discussed with technicians and developers in the room. This takes a lot of time, and can become complex to manage all changes and revisions" P22-1

"We get large reports that contain all documentation and decisions for different disciplines. There is no central way of reviewing this. Your product looks to be valuable there." P3-2

Development is related to the initial (prior to this thesis) positioning of Lynk, 'embedding quality control in the workflow of the whole team'. Which in the end was abandoned because of implementation complexity, the length of projects and amount of stakeholders.

Adoption criteria evaluation

Lacking common ground with key competitor, revision management

As mentioned earlier in this evaluation, Revision Management is seen as must-have feature by customers and thus needs to be intergrated before common ground with competititors is achieved. Only then customers might apreciate other value of Lynk.

Possible critical job assumption, seperate storage

DocStream is mentioned a lot by different stakeholders from Contractors to the Reseller. But one fundamental assumption is that they use it for project coordination, and revision management. But as the last conversations have shown, it's primary function might be just to 'share

documents between different stakeholders'. And DocStream has one unique differentiative offer, it is a separate storage from Lynks approach as it is connected to a SharePoint. Customers perceive the seperate storage as safe and secure. It needs to be researched for who this is a problem, and for what customers the added convenience of being able to directly work on files is a added value.

Sales roadmap evaluation

One software reseller was reached out to and contacted. This particular firm offers management consulting and software services to all kinds of companies in the construction sector. From developers and project owners to general contractors. The real-estate strategist (P22), worked with this specific reseller (P15) on a project and offered an insight in what their workflow and services are. In this specific project, the reseller were responsible for contract management, and drafting the phase reports, which captures project progress, delivered work and how requirements are met or changed. Which also are the large reports P4 was talking about that needs to be checked by multiple parties.

As consulting firm, they are more innovative and curious on how they can help their customers to succeed by taking responsibility for innovation activities, and creating offerings which their customers can implement and benefit from more easily.

"We are interested in the future, and to be honest your product vision and foundation speak more to us than that of DocStream" and "Your product looks incredibly user-friendly. In a good way".

"We see an interesting collaboration, you provide a new fresh look upon DMS systems, we have the knowledge and expertise in the sector."
Consultant & reseller

Reseller approach seems to be the way to go. As they, indeed, do provide knowledge and experience Lynk does not have. This can help to bridge the gap for companies culture and resources wise, as they will be able to offer the system in such a way that reduces implementation complexity.

Concluding

Initially project coordination (contract management) segment was abandoned due to implementation complexity. In hindsight also product advantage was lacking based on the fact that revision management of documents, and workflows are already present is current solutions used by customers. But through the new interviews, a better understanding of the need is created. This better understanding can form the basis of designing the features to create product superiority and increase product launch success in the Development (project coordination) segment.

Input for launch plan improvements

Value proposition

UAV-GC contract management, and the control processes around evaluating delivered work by contractors becomes complex quickly. Lynk might help to coordinate work between different stakeholders so all parties can work together more seamlessly.

Product

Project management consultants and resellers rely on competitive alternatives having revision management. This is currently lacking in Lynk. Lynk will need to develop revision management and advanced approval flow automation features before the customer is willing to adopt.

Positioning wise this will be common ground. Lynk has an advantage in the eyes of the early-adopter based on 'product vision and foundation' meaning user friendliness and integration with SharePoint.

Distribution tactics

The development segment became interesting because of two early-adopters that are interested in the product. These relationships should be cared for and furhter developed.

Sales roadmap improvements

For contract management the reseller, project management consultants who also implement software, are the effective channel to distribute the product and mitigate credibility issues of Lynk.

6.4 Overall launch plan evaluation

Two segments, each completely diffent launch strategy wise. Tenders can be described as Niche innovator launch strategy, while Development is more incremental and has competitors in the field. Both have adoption challenges due to the complexity of implementation, and asssociated risks by customers with implementing 'critical' software of a Startup. This means that channel partners, and resellers are vital to the launch success of Lynk and require further investigation for both segments.

Basic understanding of common and advantage grounds

This last round of evaluation has given better insights in the basic product strategy needs to setup the product for initial traction.

Product advantage for Tenders means, analysing documents and reducing administrative tasks in time-pressured projects.

While Development segment, project coordination needs superiority on the basis of document revision management. While product advantage for Development means, creating a coherent project track-record and more integral communication tools -communicating in PDF's and eventually possibly BIM files-.

Increased signals blocking adoption

Now that companies perceive an added value to the product, both by Tender and Development customers, implementation is 'getting closer' and new friction signals emerge.

Security, or credibility and trust, is an increasing factor of friction. Customers who were far into the sales process for Tenders canceled the pilot due to a mix of arguments circling around not being the departments priority, company circumstainces, technical limitations and a hack that happend last year.

The long sales cycles, in relation with lack of product usage is slowing down product development and provides stress to the team if it is even going to be a success. Furthermore, demands for security only now come to light and need to be countered increasing the overall costs of both development, and implementation

While at the same time, Tender teams resonate with the value proposition, and the Reseller is starting to show increased interest.

Channel partners and resellers play a vital role

A recurring problem for Lynk is the lack of credibility. As startup touching on critcal information, while needing the implementation of the whole team, both credibility and security need to be top notch for companies to give a go.

In both segments, it is key for Lynk to start to develop relationships with channel partners who can help to increase it's credibility, and play a part in reducing implementation complexity with consulting services.

Product investment over problem investment

One point of attention that was observed is that Lynk is very focussed on the qualities of its product. And this is something good, but in the case of the startup context, also dangerous. Because as we have seen, though deeper customer insights and validation the customer needs might fit a different solution better. To help overcome this product focus, Lynk might put more emphasis on the context of the customer through research and customer conversations and trying to find solutions seperate of the already exisitng product. This might result in different mock-up designs or prototypes that not directly fit in Lynk, it will help the team to get develop customer understanding before translating those insights to a feature in the product.

6.5 Key take-aways

The niche positioning and product improvements help customers to see the added value and progress sales conversations - In consideration customers evaluate the implementation of Lynk as risky and complex due to routine workflows and perceived security risk of a SaaS implementation - Input for the next iteration is given per segment.

6.6 Text 4, The rocky road forward

This text shows a though conversation held with a customer who saw the product value, but eventually canceled the pilot due to technical and risk issues.

Context

P5... The one customer that was further in the sales funnel still and almost a sale. One final meeting with the team, and a technical buyer, was held to discuss the possiblities for a pilot. This text shows the reflection between Roy and Ruben after the meeting.

Text

I called Ruben to discuss the conversation. He answered a bit frustrated. And rightfully so... After all these conversations, half a year of talks, business cases. They gave a no. A no...

The customer had considered Lynk more deeply can came to the conclusion that tender documents, but more importantly the analysis and discussions done by tender teams to write a proposal are seen as valuable and secrid information. Which they don't trust to do on a startups platform in the cloud. As the technical guy said, the SharePoint is locked. Basically nothing is possible.

A year ago, another daughter construction company got hacked. They were locked out for a week. A week no work, and all kind of information was stolen/lost. Salary and financial information also. That closed the company..

P5 had been in termoul the last years, and a big reorganisation was going to happen. Data- and digital things were going to be managed more centrally, and a new department was going to be created. They would connect us to the right person, and will do a good word for us. The Tender Director affirmed Rubens feeling of being send from wall to wall. He would do a good word for us at the other department and help us get connected. We don't know how to feel about this yet. Is he telling the truth? Or is it just kindly saying no and moving responsibility onto someone else?

The team summed up that "It is the wrong conclusion that this is a wrong product, but for us at this moment is not right time". The tender director really liked the idea of the product, if we can save time and work smarter that would be great. My people are too smart to do stupid things. And, maybe even make their work a bit more fun. But he had to call of the pilot due to all the named curcumstaices.

Reflection

A hard conversation. But it was valuable Ruben further clarified the why with theecustomer. Thanks to the shared process of viewing, analysing and discussing conversations deeper more nuanced insights were gathered (chapter 5).

Even though the sale was a no. The Tender Director really seemed to appreciate the products value, "help my smart team spent their time more valuably, and make their life a bit more fun" (chatper 4). The product advantage is validated this way, but the positioning of a 'Workspace' and direct connection with SharePoint is perceived as scary and in this case is partly a dealbreaker. In line with earlier literature and shows that SaaS delivery might be an acchileas heal for corporates and the tender segment (Chapter 2.4).

As this text shows finding the integrations with SharePoint, such a foundational aspect of the product, to be the problem is quite a set back. How could we have evaluated it earlier? The customer only considered the implementation only later once they were convinced of the products value. This shows the problem for building a product with complex ownership. Especially corporates with their different buying roles. Evaluation of core assumptions is hard in such a long and dinstant conversation process.

7. Delivering the product launch plan

This chapter brings together the evaluated product launch strategy and gathered insights regarding the distribution tactics and delivers the launch plan in a roadmap. Based on the customer-, and competitive insights actionable steps are proposed. Furthermore, this chapter reflects on the process of formulating the product advantage focussed launch plan and looks back at the initial assignment.

7.1 Bringing it together

After the critical assessment of launch practices of Lynk, two improvement plans were developed to the launch strategy and improve learning practices. This chapter aims to bring all components together and communicate their connection, why is the customer- and competitive centred approach valuable. And lastly, what might Lynk take forward, as practices, and in their launch plan.

Using customer- and competitive first approach

The critical assessment formulated that Lynk missed product advantage and learning practices to launch their product effectively. The two approaches formulated in chapter 4 and 5 aim to provide Lynk with tools to help them launch more effectively. The following section brings together the positioning and founders sales approach and demonstrates some use-cases that Lynk might use the concepts for.

Speed up time-to-market

The customer centred approach in discovery and segmentation as proposed through the positioning and founders sales approaches might help Lynk to decrease their time-to-market (chapter 5). As was shown in the autoethnographic text 2 and 3, finding early-adopters and thus willing customers comes down to speaking the same language. Through the customer-focussed discovery, and problem-competitive focussed positioning customers understand the value of the product faster. While on the same hand, Lynk is better able to evaluate customer needs and develop a fitting solution.

Create synergy between market- and technology driven innovation

Startups are all about launching product effectively. The launch strategy review (chapter 2), and effective positioning format (chapter 4) can be used to develop more market-focussed strategy. With these methods Lynk can evaluate their launch plans and each feature, or extension from a higher-level influence on the market positioning. This offers the opportunity to Lynk to transition towards a more market- oriented innovation strategy in synergy with its current tech-focus might prove the foundation for radical innovations and overall better firm performance (Hultink et al., 1997; Verganti, 2009; Rijsdijk et al., 2011). This can for example already been seen in the product extension shared in chapter 4.4, and P15's "We value your product vision more and are interested".

▲ Figure 19. Metaphorical visualisation of talking to 19 companies, with job segmentation and differentiative positioning

7.2 Internal evaluation

The team at Lynk is small, and constant meetings were held to discuss the product strategy, distribution tactics, and overall development process. Subsequent, a final delivery meeting was set up to discuss the value of the deliverables created in this thesis. Insights are evaluated per deliverable, product strategy, founder sales approach and distribution improvements.

> For me in life you learn the most when you have skin in the game. But normally, with skin in the game there is no time to go back to theory. Being able to do your thesis about a venture where you have skin in the game is something extremely unique. You are forced to zoom out and dive into the literature and reflect in ways entrepreneurs don't normally have the time to do so. Your thesis has helped us being much more methodical and better analysers of the data we create. A valuable skill that will deliver the rest of our lives. **"**
>
> Co-founder, Lynk

> **"** I now understand what we have been going through the past year, and see where we have to go.
>
> Co-founder, Lynk

Sharpening product strategy

Because of the theoretical foundations, proposed positionings and evaluations with customers Lynk has chosen to narrow down its market segments and focus only on those that show a clear added value. "We really have to start to narrow down and just focus on tenders and resellers" one co-founder mentioned. Albeit, it will still be hard to gain traction because of the implementation complexity.

Discussing the developments of past year, we came to the conclusions that startups can be just plain madness, running around with an idea in your head building something with the trust that it will all be alright. One co-founder valued the depth and nuance in customer insights and saw the added value of translation into product strategy. "This is what we were looking for in terms of interpreting interview data and translating that into the product", mentioning "I just cannot get these kinds of insights from customer interviews", the qualitative and designerly approach to customer conversations and their analysis require a set of skills, techniques and customer-centricity to get the most out of.

As mentioned earlier, Lynk is (was) a very product-oriented startup. Shifting from product to problem-oriented discovery has expanded Lynk's knowledge of running startups. "This has taught us a new way of looking at product development and running a startup in general and will help us beyond Lynk", one co-founder mentioned in the last meeting. While progress is slow overall in B2B development, the concepts such as jobs-to-be-done, segmentation and competitive alternatives help to more

systematically look and interpret conversations with customers and develop the product opportunity. "We had started with Project Coordination, and still have that as an option open but now better understand what we need to do to succeed" as it was found out that one competitor has features that customers valued, but was neglected by Lynk earlier on over differentiating features.

While the product strategy improvements might help sharpen the knife, uncertainty is part of the startup game and will most likely always be part of the startup game. As uncertainty always remained in the weekly product strategy meetings during this thesis, "I also don't know the answer, but I find it scary to say we only focus on Tenders because this closes doors for other opportunities", one co-founder mentioned. This thesis put a heavy focus on customer insights, but further research is needed to progress product launch knowledge, "Big questions are still open, what is the problem worth to customers? And what is withholding people from switching?". Researching other techniques that help to evaluate fuzzy front-end ideas would be valuable, such as financial opportunity sizing, or integrating more market trends and domain expert insights.

Gathering both reliable data, and sales

Being able to gather reliable insights is key to a successful startup process. "Build and they will come" is only true in stories, and startups can be stories but should be business. While internally in Lynk over the course of the thesis, the value of sales, as solid discovery conversations gathered more and more appreciation. The techniques

presented in this thesis, combining qualitative research and conceptual selling practices were received with open arms. As one co-founder notes, "I am getting more and more the feeling that this charlatan activity has some science to it. There are actually methods and techniques you can learn" and "Connecting sales and discovery is actually right what we need, being able to gather rich customer insights to inform the product, while also pushing forward a sale". The founders sales approach is implemented in Lynk's daily practices through Notion and practices of customer conversations. Notes are made, analysed seperately based on core concepts and insights taken to broader level per segment.

The team also noted that taking time for discovery before turning to pitch acts as a rich ground for sales and product development. It takes time for people to adopt new techniques. One co-founder noted that "Sometimes I can be too selling, while neglecting answers of customers. I see the value in this more now and want to make more space for that". The founders sales approach described in chapter 5 can be taken forward as personal roadmap to further improve the discovery and sales skills of the customer-facing founders.

The wall of adoption, and distribution tactics

Although this thesis put much focus on product strategy as this was where most of the gains for Lynk were, distribution of B2B products is still something that Lynk can research furhter. As relationships between reseller or channel experts might become vital to gain credibility in the market.

Apart from the product launch perspective of finding and converting customers, the legal and business aspects of a B2B sales are also open for further learning. As one co-founder rightfully noted, "I think we are still really underestimating this B2B sales process, If I see what companies have to go through to do software development for corporates... 300 pages of contract agreements, from insurance to terms upon bankruptcy".

In hindsight, the proposed strategy to further focus on resellers feels logical because of the complexity of the sale, customer needs for service, and credibility challenges Lynk has to deal with due to the type of product and customer. "The reseller strategy would be perfect for us, as they have the experience, and we (Lynk) bring a fresh perspective".

7.3 Input for further development

The internal validation showed that Lynk appreciated the developed product strategy and founders' sales approach to gatering reliable information. Creating a complete launch plan seems to take more time than one thesis. Unfortunately it was not possible to give a final, conclusive answer regarding the single correct launch or distribution strategy. Nevertheless, due to the research in this thesis and the internal evaluation sessions, some concrete action points are formulated that Lynk can take forward in further detailing and evaluating their
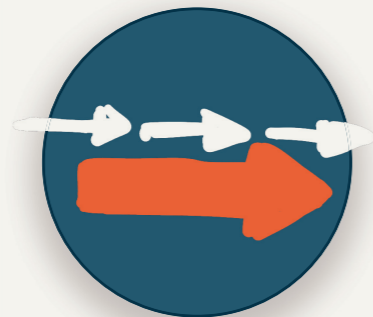
Strategy

Invest in early-adopters

More innovative people with burning problems, Tender Directors & Project management consultants

Focus on essential jobs

Tenders, document analysis and requirement management. Development, approval flows and revision management.

Become experts in the field

Research Tender, and ISO project coordination processes to inform both product development, and expand channel expert network.

Distribution

Reduce implementation complexity

Design possible mitigations to SharePoint integration risk, while keeping viability and implementation complexity in mind.

Develop relationships with channel partners

Develop reseller relationships, and talk to consultants in both segments for information and gaining credibility.

7.4 The road forward

The updated product positionings designed in chapter 4 resulted in a problem- and product advantage-oriented launch strategy. Unfortunately, chapter 6 showed that either a segment lacks product advantage or a distribution channel. And to launch successfully, both need to be in place. That means two directions are currently open for Lynk, and the ball might drop in any direction still. To clarify the road forward for Lynk and communicate the product- and distribution strategy, a roadmap is designed. The strategic roadmap (figure Figure 17) is structured according to the principles of the design roadmap (Simonse, 2018). The product strategy (chapter 4) and distribution activities (chapter 5) were designed throughout this thesis's design phases. Traditionally, the roadmap will have one end goal, but multiple scenarios can play out due to the uncertainty of the start-up (chapter 6). The roadmap captures both scenario's while leaving open room for adjustments. The end vision captures high-level product launch goals and hopes to embed successful launch principles in the planning practices of Lynk.

H1 Early-traction

Lynk has two segments which launching into could be effective, Tenders and Development. Due to the uncertainty of what direction gains traction first, sales and development focus should be shifted towards early adopters and delivering product superiorty and meaningfulness.

Distribution is hard due to credibility and implementation complexity. Lynk should invest in early-adopters and sharpening product advantage for both segments.

Tenders offer product strategy advantage, as little competition is present, and a serious repeating and high-value pain is found. Due to the innovativeness of the solution, a new approach to team collaboration, customers need more education. Furthermore, sales complexity makes initial sales more difficult. The focus should be put on trying to contact influencers, and resellers, through which customers might be contacted more effectively.

Development offer distribution advantage as contact with resellers has been very positive. But the downside is that incumbent solutions are present, and Lynk's platform needs document revision management to achieve common ground with competitors. This is the product focus of development in the initial phase.

H2 Focus

Once traction with one segment is achieved, development focus should be put on developing the product roadmap for that specific segment with the goal to grow the product advantage. Integrating product use feedback into the further development and adjustments of the product will be key. Furthermore developing the reseller relationship and preparing marketing material.

The product could expand into smart analysis features for Tenders, such as OCR search and Document comparison. Building forwards on the key job and pain of, analysing tender documents and managing requirements more easily. While in the development segment, the product can expand its Workflow features and integration with Teams. Design research projects should be set up to inform the next horizon of product development.

The distribution activities depend on the segment chosen. As the Tender Workspace becomes a more innovative product, the focus should be put on education material and creating collaborations with early-adopters and tender consultants. While for development, the focus is cast on expanding the reseller partnerships. For both segments, content that informs customers, such as whitepapers, could be beneficial to explain both function and value to prospects.
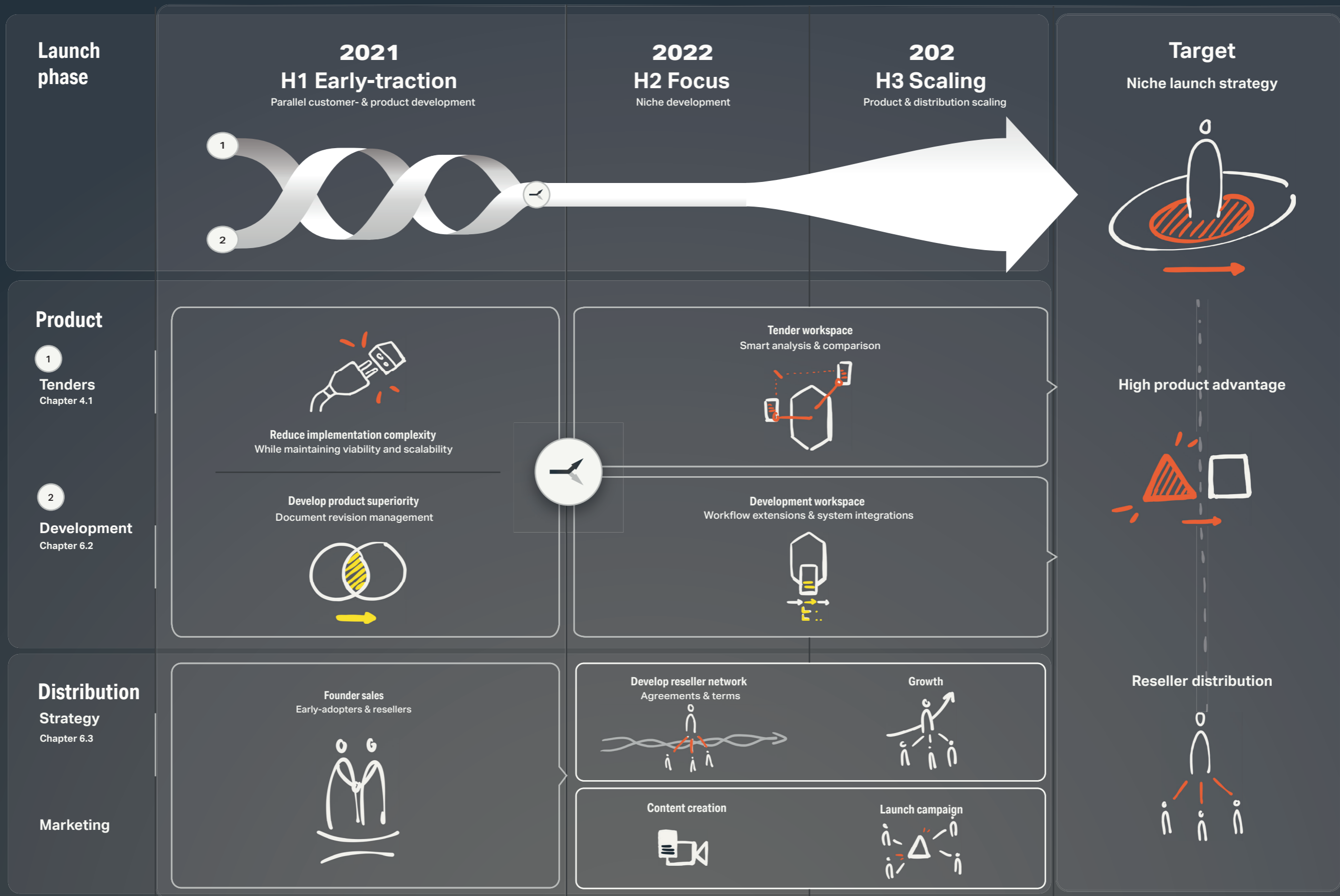
H3 Scaling

The third horizon aims to grow the beachhead target segment and gain a majority market share for that segment. The product should be further developed aimed at increasing the product advantage over competitive alternatives.

In the last horizon, the focus shifts from product development to distribution and growth activities. Marketing campaigns, educational content and reseller distribution strategy should all be developed and executed. Educational content plays the role to inform new customers and transitioning them from awareness to interest. While creating references from reliable mainstream customers will be paramount for further growth into the broader market audience.

Product strategy-wise, Tenders focus on expanding the function towards requirement management/decision making logging. For the Development segment, Lynk might also develop its BIM/IFC capabilities to facilitate communication within BIM and create a workspace for the different parties involved throughout the development workspace.

Lynk Strategic Launch Roadmap

Launch phase	2021 H1 Early-traction Parallel customer- & product development	2022 H2 Focus Niche development	202 H3 Scaling Product & distribution scaling	Target Niche launch strategy
Product				
1 Tenders Chapter 4.1	Reduce implementation complexity While maintaining viability and scalability	Tender workspace Smart analysis & comparison		High product advantage
2 Development Chapter 6.2	Develop product superiority Document revision management	Development workspace Workflow extensions & system integrations		
Distribution Strategy Chapter 6.3	Founder sales Early-adopters & resellers	Develop reseller network Agreements & terms	Growth	Reseller distribution
Marketing		Content creation	Launch campaign	

▲ Figure 20. Strategic roadmap showing Lynk's high-level launch plan proposal

8. Finalising the project

In this chapter the project is concluded by reflecting on the initial assignment and deliverables summarised in tips for other early-stage B2B SaaS startups. Lastly, a personal reflection closes of the thesis.

8.1 Text 5, spotting castles in the air

This text shows the process of developing the initial positioning for Lynk (Costruction back then), developed in September 2019, 1,5 years ago. It connects to the insights developed in this thesis on what building blocks are vital to build an effective and realistic product launch plan by showin how not to do it, but still having the feeling it was a success. Although it might feel like you are building something valuable, it is only so if it is from the eyes of a clear, explicit set of the customers.

Context

Ruben and I had known each other from BEP and kept in touch. Throughout the past years we had done some consultancy work together. While a new startup was taking shape, started by Ruben as spin-off of an earlier consultancy/joint venture in the US.

The startup was a project/document-management system for the construction industry and was gaining interest from a few early customers. Ruben asked if I would like to help out and design the Brand, as it needed a clear story. I of course said yes.

Text

We met at the Douwe Egberts cafe next to Rotterdam Central Station. Our office you could say.

I had setup a session to dive into the Brand DNA of lynk (then called Costruction) and create a draft in which we could build further. Because, if we didn't put anything to paper, we could not develop the product- and brand consistency. Also the product doesn't come out of nothing and should originate from a vision-, or brand- from a clear purpose. Otherwise, what is the product right?

The session lasted three hours, where we went through the four C analysis, using Ruben's analysis based on insights from previous customer conversations. Context, customer, competitor company. These should from the basis of a clear and differentiating positioning that stands out and make our startup a success. The competitors was a wide field, from Document-management tools, to Contract management tools, to planning and budgeting software. We made a map of all software used by Constructors that were talked to. The customers their main pains were information overload, missing structure throughout the process, too many tools throughout the process and overall just chaos.

This was definitely a context rich for improvements!

In short, the construction maker is having major issues. Current products have, "Bad UX, speed is horrible, and miss features" quoted Ruben. While they were being sold for serious money, Acconex for 1.6 billion dollar. We should be able to build something better.

Following the process everything went smooth and we had the feeling we were really making something unique. "intuitively integrate quality control throughout the workflow of the whole team" the positioning would be, targeting teams in the construction sector first, but more widely targeted at "document-heavy project based teams". The story of the brand DNA, and the positioning where translated into pitch decks that followed the SPD/Viki master pitcher script, and we collaborated with Juliane Trier who helped us to sharpen the story and make great illustrations that would visualise the story. Ruben was ecstatic about the work, the product is kick-ass, it is a great story, and the opportunity is great. Costruction will become the new Acconex! The macro-economic factors seemed favourable to take a risk

Reflection

In this text clearly the design of "luchtkastelen" can be seen. The positioning resulted from a clear process, and provided a strategy. But it did not help to speed of traction in a sense.

From a consultant perspective this project was a great success. The customer (Ruben/Lynk) was happy with the outcome and felt it would help to get the product out there. The sessions helped to create clarity in what Costruction was all about, and make it more explicit to help in pitches with customers.

The feeling of success that I got from it, by being able to add significant value because of my different perspective compared to the current skills at Lynk, made me felt valued.

But reflecting on it more critically from my current view -at the end of this thesis-, there were some key mistakes that led to the final outcome not being as reliable and valuable as it could have been. The 4C method was a good suggestion as it informs and defines the Launch Strategy (which will form the thread throughout this thesis) but the initial data and assumptions going into the session resulted in the wrong outcome. First, the primary source of data, came from abstractions made by the founder through customer conversations. Second, the market segmentation was kept extremely wide, making the fit with the customer very broad and therefor less fitting -customer not recognising themselves in it-, Third competitors where viewed from a macro perspective resulting in unspecific insights that do not help to understand opportunities for differentiation or understand the value delivered by these competitors.

Personally, I had always thought my responsibility was to 'design the right thing', and the rest of the team focussed on 'designing the thing right'. I had all this knowledge on design and customer centerednesss, and did my "magic" with the data that we had at that time. Which in hindsight for the earlier named reasons was too superfiscial to make meaningful progress.

8.2 Discussion

Chapter 1 began with the assignment to develop a launch plan for Lynk that might help them to gain traction, faster and more effectively. Specifically the assignment was aimed at trying to find a way to launch into mainstream markets. The Graduation Brief (Appenfix VII) hoping that there would be some kind of magic formula, opening the doors for succesfull launch. There really isn't. But this discussion reflects on the outcomes in relation to the initial assignment and broader context.

Limitations

The context of this thesis is critical in evaluating the added value and insights gained from this thesis. The insights are case-specific to Lynk, while some abstract generalisations might be made that apply to other B2B SaaS Startups their product launch plan.

Due to lack of access and time limitations, data samples in both evaluation rounds were lacking in the segments of consultancies and business controllers. This has influenced the reliability of the insights. Decisions were made on intuition in that case to progress the project but should be taken into account.

For tech-focussed founders & startups

The context of this project is foundational to generalisability. Lynk served as the starting point and can be described as product/tech-oriented. Lynk did not explicitly practice customer-centred research in the form of jobs-to-be-done, used product strategy metrics as product advantage or implemented B2B selling practices. This should be taken into account as it reduces, or limits, the generalisability to other startups with the same, or partly the same, initial conditions.

The outcome of this thesis provides theoretical, design and personal perspectives on the launching of a B2B product and thus might provide rich insights for other B2B startups and their founders.

Take-aways for other B2B SaaS entrepeneurs

A good product is important, and focus is even more important, but focussing on the right things is vital. It is, though, painful and tiresome to develop the wrong things. While this will always be the case in a startup, knowing how to evaluate product strategy opportunities better and implementation context might help reduce the effort you put in while reducing the time-to-market of the new product.

This thesis has shown the underlying mechanisms from theory in action in practice. Through the design of the improvements, evaluation of them, and reflection on doing some principle insights on effectively launching B2B SaaS products can be distilled.

Aligning the early-stage startup product launch stars

1. Iterate for product advantage in a small segment

2. Focus on ease of implementation

3. Invest in early-adopters

If all three are aligned, product launch effectiveness will be highly improved, and early traction achieved moe easily while making the most out of the limit time and resources of a startup.

Invest in qualitative and designerly research

Albeit, this thesis started more from marketing- than a design perspective. The gathering of data and interpretation of that data has been qualitative and designerly in nature. B2B tech-focussed startups might gain rich customers- and therefore, product insights if applied correctly and given the space to research and design. Specifically, practices such as UX-research might prove valuable in understanding customer needs and the implementation context that both form the basis of product advantage and ease of implementation.

Recommendations for Lynk

It is advised that the tips delivered in chapter 6 (too shallow to call principles, but close) should be embedded in the co-founding teams their mind. These tips might help steer Lynk from product/tech to customer/problem focus and increase product launch and startup success.

Autoethnography has been very valuable in implementing theory into practice and developing learnings both from the actions and from the theory. It is advised to the co-founding team of Lynk to keep practising autoethnography as it helps to speed up personal and organisational growth.

Furthermore, for next ventures, Lynk might consider the founders their skills and passion more in evaluating opportunities and choosing a direction. Next to the macro-economic factors used to assess Lynk's opportunity and the customer-centred factors discussed in-depth in this thesis.

This thesis focussed in-depth on product strategy and, more specifically, gaining in-depth customer- and competitive insights. Throughout the evaluation chapters, it was felt that more financial- and trend-based insights were missing. Lynk might investigate these factors and how to practically apply them in the future to improve the opportunity evaluation practices.

Recommendations for future research

The autoethnographic technique has been valuable in gaining new perspectives on events while linking them to theory. They proved to step back that provided an overview of the chaotic context in a startup and fit them into the bigger literature scheme.

This thesis tried to apply theory to a startup context. They are inherently counter opposites of each other. The theory is a structured and coded form of reality, while startups are extremely fuzzy and unstructured. It was a big challenge to apply the structure in practice due to the width of the initial assignment and corresponding literature. A more focussed assignment and iterative application of theory in practice (as Action Research proposes) is recommended.

8.3 Reflection

My goals for my graduation projects were to expand my knowledge beyond designing a solution and to understand what makes new products a success or not. That I got the opportunity to deepdive into the product launch of my own startup has been a blessing. Even though the intermingled responsibilities and interests sometimes made it hard to or write this thesis, or work effectively in the startup. In the end I think the broad exploration of literature, and deep personal involvement in the context is the richest learning experience I have had in 'design carreer'. In this section I reflect on my journey and personal learnings.

Juggling while being strapped to a rocket

Developing a startup with such a talented team is a blessing I can't put in words. With this team literally the sky is the limit technology wise. It is also the first time I have felt paralysed to provide input on design level as it is my own responsibility to come up with what to do and why that is important. Looking back at why I it was difficult to determine what to do had to do with understanding the 'levers' of what would steer the startup towards a more effective launch, and understanding the position where the product currently sits. This thesis through its insights in connecting marketing, product launch and SaaS adoption literature provides the map for me to better dissect what the problem is and further plan design projects around improvements. With a team that can build anything, I can fully focus on design strategy and developing products that matter and launch effectively. The startup playground dream, and I am deeply humbled by the opportuntity that I got through this thesis, wisdom from the supervisory team and team and Lynk.

Project direction

Looking back at the scoping of the assessment, and improvement plans out of them. They feel too broad, focussing both on strategy, and discovery/learning practices. If I could do it again, I would narrow it down to developing just the product strategy and going all in on that. The distribution focus added significant noise in the project which I could not place only later in the project, and only place well at the end. As founder of the startup I wanted to do everything at the same time, this would be a tip to the next startup thesis. Scope down.

Structure, structure, structure

My nemisis. Achilles heel. Arch rival. Well lets start by saying that you only grow by confronting your fears. And boy have I been confronted in this project. It started with the definition of the assignment of this thesis. To define what the most burning question was and to focus just on that, which I did sort of. Then throughout the project, looking back, it feels that I have kept connecting everything to everything. I really want to become better at this, after my thesis I will dive into project management practices such as OKR. The other aspect of structuring, writing. Becoming better at writing has been a joruney throughout this thesis. To freely speak my mind from intuition is not a problem. But to strucutre, and restructure and restructure has been... hell. I have tried to be better in academic writing, grew a bit, but still feel awefully insecure about it. Although I should say, I understand that it just takes a lot of time. And personally I am just not made to gaze at paragraph for sixty minutes. After trying to write my thesis in a word document, and finally starting to design my report in indesign with visuals the project started to live, and I could connect the dots more often. But it was a bit too late then already. My learning, start visualising everything and then write the outline and detail things step-by-step.

Trusting the process

"You want to know what the outcome will be before you begin" Erik-Jan said. And it is 100% true. Trusting the process means trusting your intition I see now, and doing things to later correct and support them with literature. Not to define them 100% beforehand, and only later fill in the blanks. I will take this with me and try to improve by designing the process and trusting it, going deep in each topic and iteratively try to connect the dots. It is oke not to know the anwer, take a step in a direction and only later finding out that it didn't work. Or did.

▲ Figure 21. Abstract visualisation of the key learnings of this thesis, or an ufo beaming up a square and a triangle

9. References

Appendices

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