University of Warwick – Warwick Business School

E-procurement and e-marketing: the case of Unilever

IB3B00 - E-Business and Value Chains

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Executive Summary

Unilever is one of the world's largest fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies that operates in a highly competed market amongst Procter & Gamble, Nestlé and Mars. Because its competitors offer products of similar quality, the company has to differentiate itself through other means. Since 2010, Unilever has been driving its *Sustainable Living Plan* to differentiate itself in the market, but it has also presented the company with challenges in terms of profitability.

In order to keep its operating margins, Unilever has been cuttings costs from purchasing with the help of e-procurement provided by the software vendor Ariba. The e-procurement software has helped to consolidate Unilever's decentralised procurement management, and has been a key factor in enabling the Sustainable Living Plan owing to a better control and visibility of its supply chain. The biggest cost reductions have been realised in the *operating items* area through *systematic sourcing.* However, the implementation has not come without its challenges. People have been reluctant to change to the new electronic system and many local processes and legacy systems have caused integration issues. Moreover, because the company has been using the same software vendor now for around 14 years, the e-procurement system is becoming common place, and no longer creates a competitive advantage. In order to improve their current system, an adaptation of Kraljic's purchasing matrix is introduced that can help Unilever to categorize its supply material with regard to supply risk and value impact, and consequently use different e-procurement systems for different categories.

E-marketing has played a key role in creating additional perceived user value. The company has been using a multichannel approach including the use of social media, mobile, TV and print. This approach has been highly successful: for instance, Mintel (2012) found that consumers view

Unilever's Lynx brand as highly differentiated and unique, which is in line with Unilever's differentiation strategy. Furthermore, the company has successfully tapped into the emerging markets with its mobile communications strategy in China and India. As a result of developing its internal capability and organisational structure in digital marketing, the company has created a competitive advantage. However, some resistance to change still remains and the company has not acquired the required internal technological capability to keep up with the rising internet traffic on its websites. Even though its e-marketing has brought its retail customers branding support and created a loyal consumer base, a closer relationship with its customers using, for instance, mobile campaigns would generate additional customer value.

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Instructions

Identify an organisation that uses the tools and techniques discussed in the module to deliver enhanced customer value. Focus on two aspects of their business model, preferably one upstream facing and one downstream facing (such as the use of e-procurement, e-marketing or e-SCM) and write a report addressing the following:

1. How have the organisation's business and/or supply chain management practices utilised the tools and techniques?
2. What new opportunities have there been for the organisation to develop their use of these tools and techniques to create additional customer value?
3. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation's current use these tools and techniques to support the organisation's overall business offering.
4. Suggest improvements that could be used to create greater customer value or to help differentiate the organisation from its competitors. Justify any proposals.

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(Excluding the Cover page, Executive summary, Table of contents, Headings, Instructions, Appendices, References and Footnotes)

E-Procurement

According to IBM (2014) e-procurement can be described as the "acquisition of direct and indirect products and services using the internet and new technologies to facilitate a seamless, end-to-end stream of strategic procurement activities by connecting buyers with suppliers."

1. Utilisation of tools and techniques

Unilever's organisational management has traditionally been decentralised, where purchasing has been done locally without proper tracking of spending across Unilever's different operating companies and brand categories. In order to integrate its numerous systems, the company chose to use the package software vendor Ariba for e-procurement. Initially the system was used only for *operating items[1]* that represented a significant area for cost savings. (Anderson & Woolley, 2002)

The new system offered plan-to-pay functionality with requisitioning capability, leveraging integration with static catalogue and dynamic catalogue procurement processes. It also enabled simple integration of negotiated contracts to provide the visibility needed to track and manage end user compliance, in addition to online invoice reconciliation to speed up and streamline the reconciliation and payment cycle. Pre-built reports allowed the viewing of spending by commodity, spending by supplier and department, as well as supplier and compliance efficiency. This data enabled them to consolidate purchasing volume to enhance scale to drive out non value-added costs, and create automatically an information base to manage materials purchased. Furthermore, the Ariba solutions eradicated paperwork and significantly reduced purchase order errors. (Anderson & Woolley, 2002)

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[1] Items that are not part of the final product that are produced, also called indirect materials and MRO goods (Maintenance, Repair and Operations) (Jelassi & Enders, 2008).

Based on Kaplan & Sawhney's (2000) B2B e-marketplace classification scheme (see Figure 1), the e-procurement system utilised by Unilever falls under the MRO Hub category meaning that they buy *operating inputs* through *systematic sourcing*. Systematic sourcing involves negotiated contracts with qualified suppliers and information sharing (Jelassi & Enders, 2008), in contrast to *spot sourcing*, which is used to fill immediate supply needs.
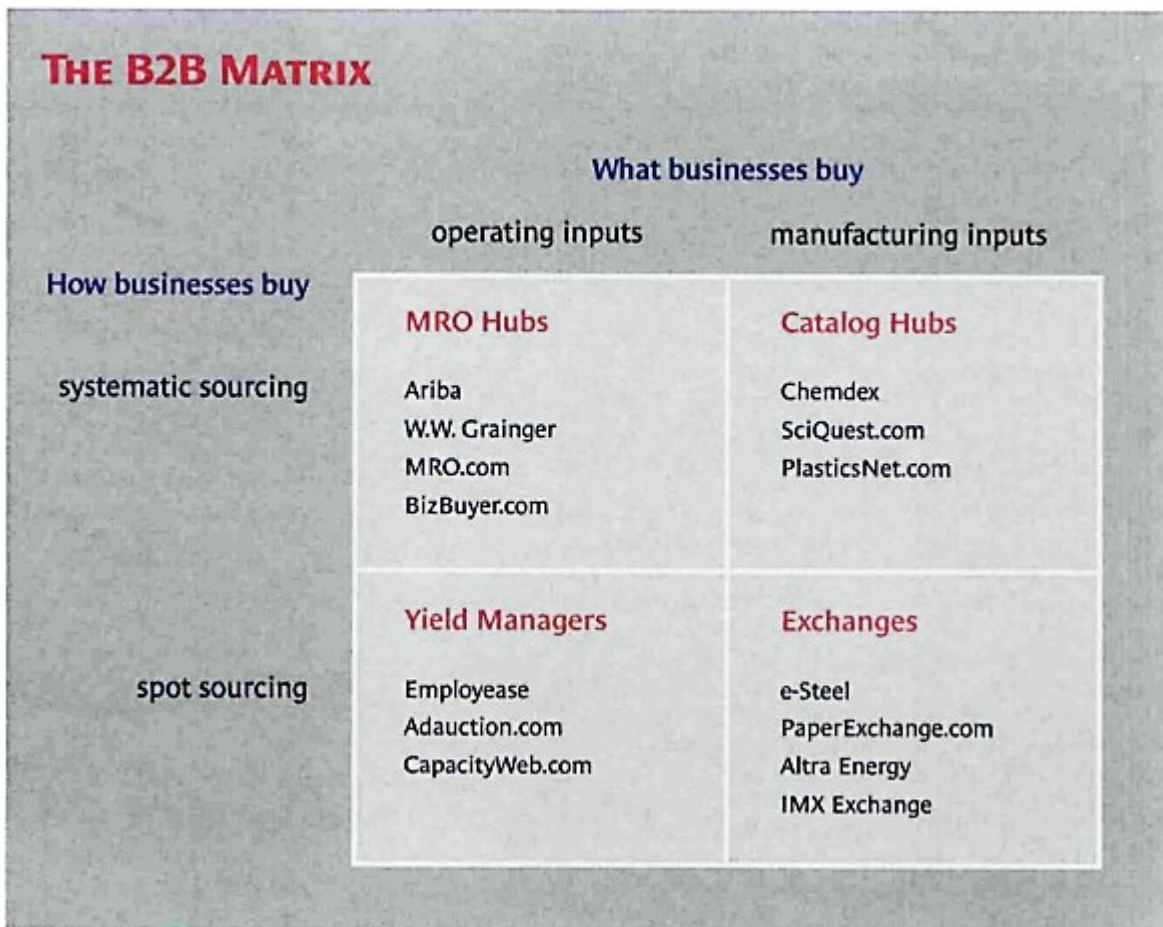

Figure 1. Classification of different types of B2B e-marketplaces (Kaplan & Sawhney, 2000).

From the decentralised procurement management Unilever had moved to analysing and reporting on purchasing spend across categories and companies within the group. (Anderson & Woolley, 2002)

2. Opportunities to develop the tools and techniques to create additional customer value

2.1 Customer value defined

Kotler, et al. (2009) define customer-perceived value (CPV) as the difference between the customer's evaluation of all the benefits and all the costs of an offering. See the factors affecting CPV illustrated in Figure 2.
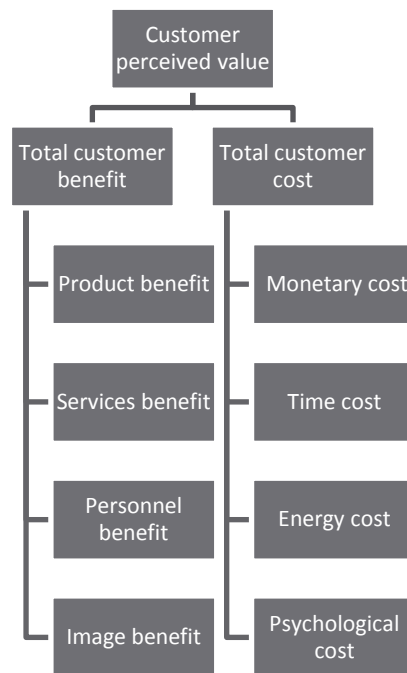
Figure 2. Customer-perceived value. Adapted from Kotler, et al. (2009).

2.2 Opportunity to integrate e-procurement with a differentiating sustainability strategy

With the rising social concerns for a greener environment, Unilever started its *Sustainable Living Plan* in 2010 (Unilever, 2014) with the intention of following a *differentiation* strategy as detailed by Porter (2008). This strategic objective was enabled by its e-procurement infrastructure that allows Unilever to control its supply chain sourcing activities globally (Schulte, 2009). As a result of the alignment of the procurement processes and the differentiation strategy with sustainability branding, Unilever is on its way to creating a competitive advantage.

This brings **visibility and transparency** to Unilever's supply network, which is directly reflected in

its **retail customer's supply chain**.

3. Strengths and weaknesses of the organisation's current use of these tools and techniques to support the organisation's overall business offering

3.1 Business offering

Unilever directly competes with a number of multinational fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies including P&G, Nestlé and Mars that all have similarly innovative products. To differentiate itself in the market, Unilever has applied brand-specific improvements such as fair-trade or rainforest certified products that are part of the group's wider Sustainable Living Plan. (MarketLine, 2012) However, this presents a challenge in profitability and keeping its operating expenses to a minimum. In this section the strengths and weaknesses of its e-procurement system to support this goal are discussed.

3.2 Strengths

3.2.1 E-procurement supporting Sustainable Living Plan strategy by improving profitability

Aggregate buying and spend analysis has enabled Unilever to gain leverage with its suppliers and negotiate volume discounts through its various businesses across 170 countries (Anderson & Woolley, 2002; Perera, 2012). In addition, due to the embedded contracting feature of Ariba, Unilever has been able to increase contract compliance, which has resulted in an increased use of preferred suppliers and reduced off-contract spending. (Anderson & Woolley, 2002) On the transactional side, the use of Ariba has reduced error rates and order-processing times, which in turn have led to a reduction of on-site inventory and an increased focus on value-add activities. (Anderson & Woolley, 2002)

By the end of 2012 Unilever had been able to scale up its e-procurement system, and now it buys most of its materials and services centrally. This has contributed to its €1.4 billion supply chain savings in 2012, which is crucial for keeping its business profitable whilst pushing the Sustainable

Living Plan differentiation strategy. (Unilever, 2012)

3.3 Challenges and weaknesses

3.3.1 Process inconsistencies

According to a study by Deloitte Consulting the biggest challenges around e-procurement revolve around rolling out consistent business processes (Hicks, 2002), which has been a challenge for Unilever, too. For instance, electronic invoicing faced problems due to a need to generate paper invoices in several countries. In addition, different legacy systems have caused integration issues and European operations have presented a challenging situation with their various local purchasing groups with long-term supplier relationships. (Anderson & Woolley, 2002)

3.3.2 Change management

Furthermore, large challenges have been related to managing change. Many of Unilever's operatings companies have been frustrated by the slow pace of centralised negotiations, and many have found the electronic system to be inflexible. (Anderson & Woolley, 2002)

3.3.3. Losing competitive advantage

Part of Unilever's weakness is that the e-procurement system, which started as cutting edge at the beginning of last decade, is starting to become common place as pointed out by Bloomberg (2010): "94 of the Fortune 100 and more than 200,000 other companies use Ariba's SaaS solutions". Hence, the software does not create a competitive advantage as it used to.

4. Improvements to create greater customer value

Based on an adaptation of Kraljic's (1983) strategic sourcing matrix to e-procurement (see Figure 3), there is potential for Unilever to apply different types of e-procurement systems depending on the risk of supply and the profit impact of its supplies. For routine items such as office supplies, reverse auctions might serve better than Unilever's current system of using e-

catalogues to buy them. Using e-intelligence[2] for critical and bottleneck items, and online bidding

systems for leverage items[3] as suggested by Baily, et al. (2008) Unilever has the potential to create

a strategic fit between its use of technology and supply management that will create a competitive

advantage and differentiate Unilever from its competitors. Customer value is created through a

more reliant source of supply and better monetary value as indicated by Kotler, et al. (2009) in

Figure 2.

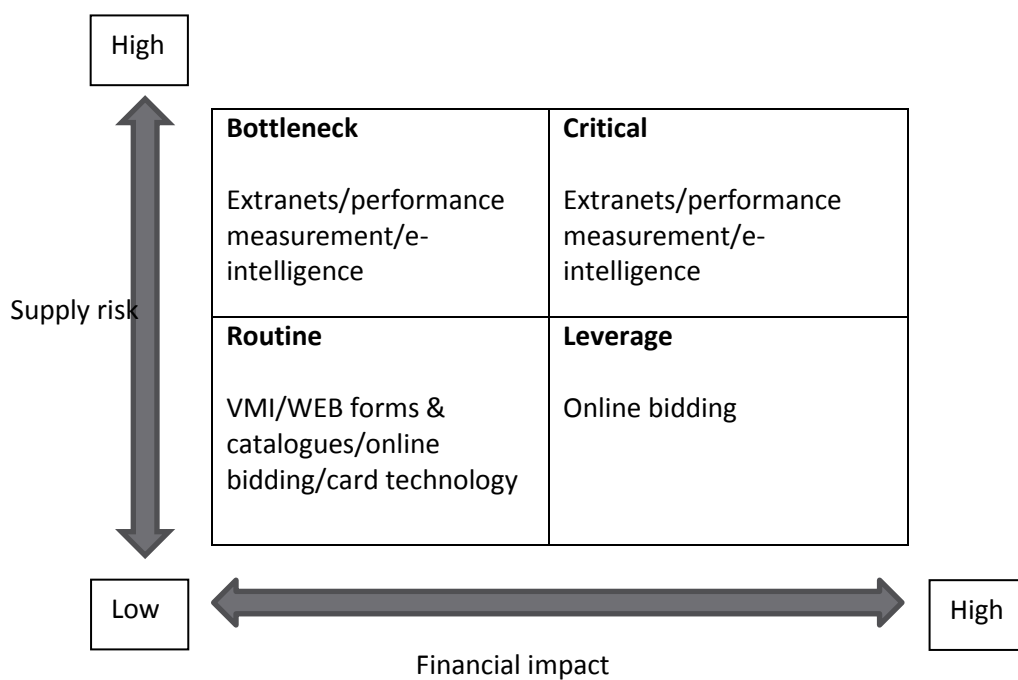| High		
Bottleneck Extranets/performance measurement/e-intelligence	**Critical** Extranets/performance measurement/e-intelligence
Routine VMI/WEB forms & catalogues/online bidding/card technology	**Leverage** Online bidding

Supply risk

Low — Financial impact — High

Figure 3. Adapted from (Baily, et al., 2008).

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[2] E-intelligence is the collation and analysis of performance management information (Baily, et al., 2008).
[3] Leverage items include commodities such as direct raw materials for which there are a number of suppliers available with roughly interchangeable capabilities (Atkinson, 2000).

E-Marketing

5. Utilisation of tools and techniques

In order to analyse the usage of Unilever's digital communication tools, we utilise the REAN (Reach, Engage, Activate and Nurture) model[4].

5.1 A multichannel approach

According to Unilever (2013) by engaging people through multiple media, their marketing campaigns have the potential to achieve greater impact. For instance, when Axe (Lynx) marked the launch of its range of Apollo deodorants, shampoos and shower gels with a multichannel campaign in more than 60 countries that included a competition to win a place on a space flight, more than a million people registered to participate, building brand awareness[5] and engaging[6] the consumers with the brand. (Unilever, 2013)

5.2 Social media – a communications and brand building tool

In 2012, Unilever ran a £4.5 million campaign on Facebook offering a three-day party on a Caribbean island for Lynx grooming brand Facebook fans. The campaign featured a series of six Facebook 'treasure hunts' through which consumers could win a pair of tickets to a party on the island. Unilever-owned ice cream brand Magnum ran a similar online treasure hunt for two years with success. (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2012). These campaigns have raised customer awareness and helped in brand-building in accordance with the 'reach' and 'engage' of the REAN model (Jackson, 2009).

5.3 Mobile and customer service

Unilever found that 80% of males aged 17 to 23 use their mobile phones as alarm clocks. As a result they created an app customised by country that wakes up users with the woman of their

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[4] See Appendix 2 for more details of the REAN model
[5] Building brand awareness is part of the 'reach' phase of the REAN model
[6] Engaging is the second phase of the REAN model

choice as part of Axe's (Lynx) marketing campaign. According to Unilever this creates both "utility and entertainment for consumers" that nurture[7] the consumer. (Montero, 2013)

5.4 Newsjacking marketing strategy and digital tool utilisation technique

Unilever's media director notes how key efforts in digital marketing are directed towards making content that gets picked up by other media (Neff, 2008). According to Mintel (2012) newsjacking, that Unilever utilises to inject ideas into breaking news with the goal of generating media coverage, can drastically improve a brand's reputation and SEO ranking at a very low cost and help in building awareness of emerging brands. For example, Unilever launched a '*Sorry Harry*' campaign within days of Prince Harry's naked escapades in Las Vegas, referring to its marketing efforts that Lynx products make men irresistible to women. As a result, mentions of the brand on social networking site Twitter more than doubled (Mintel, 2012). This strategy seems to be working since Mintel's *Deodorants and Bodysprays – UK – February 2012* report found that consumers view the Lynx brand as highly differentiated and unique, which is in line with Unilever's differentiation strategy. (Mintel, 2012)

6. Opportunities to develop the tools and techniques to create additional customer value

6.1 Opportunity to capture the growing demand in the emerging markets with mobile marketing and big data

Neff (2009) points out that digital media has traditionally been seen as a strategy for mature markets, but Unilever has found that digital media and branded content programs have started to work in their Indian and Chinese markets, especially on the mobile side. Global Company Intelligence (2014) reports that in September 2013, Unilever signed a new deal with the mobile marketing company, Brandtone, which will enable "its brands to use the power of mobile and big data to build long-term one-to-one relationships with consumers, particularly in emerging

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[7] Nurturing is the fourth category in the REAN model, which drives the purpose of making the customer loyal according to Jackson (2009).

markets ". The first benefits of the cooperation with Brandstone were realised with Unilever's Omo detergent brand. Valentine (2012) reports how South African consumers were encouraged to text in an on-pack promotional code to get free mobile phone credit. In return for the free phone credit, people were asked a few questions about their personal information (such as gender) and buying behaviours. (Marketing Week, 2012) According to Brandstone this led to a 20% increase in Omo sales with 1 million customers responding (Valentine, 2012). Valentine (2012) denotes how this might lead to brand equity devaluation but agrees that is **an effective mechanism to bring customers back to the store, which brings direct benefits to Unilever and its retail customers**. Furthermore, this increases Unilever's understanding of the consumer, which helps it to *identify* and *anticipate* consumer needs. (Chaffey, 2011).

6.2 Opportunities to exploit rapid changes in digital technologies and platforms

Chaffey & Smith (2013) note how the rapid development of new e-marketing platforms generates opportunities for first movers. New platforms are adopted constantly including Foursquare, Instagram and Pinterest that have emerged since the first social networks (Facebook, Google+ and Twitter). Unilever has been able to use these interactive communication channels as part of its Dove marketing campaign that engages women in discussion about negative beauty related advertisements. (Montero, 2013) The **social media engagement by Unilever brings marketing support for the retailers and it creates product loyalty, which brings the consumers back to the stores**. Furthermore, the consumer benefits through better customer service[8] and interactive communication via social media, which indirectly creates value for the retail customer.

7. Strengths and weaknesses of the organisation's current use of these tools and techniques to support the organisation's overall business offering

As mentioned previously Unilever aims for a differentiation strategy through its Sustainable Living Plan. E-marketing plays a key role in this respect as it enables branding that builds a differentiated

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[8] Customer service is part of after sales marketing, or nurturing as in accordance with the REAN model.

image of the product. In addition, marketing tends to be cheaper than conventional marketing channels such as TV and print, which further contributes to Unilever's operating margins.

7.1 Strengths

7.1.1 Internal capability developed over the years

Unilever has over the year made internal changes, including the appointment of a small team of digital-marketing specialists in 2006 to look across brands and categories. This helps to improve the quality and consistency of its new media content. (Harwood, 2006) Since then a number of initiatives have been made including digital training programs and the establishment of a digital advisory board. (Montero, 2013)

7.2 Weaknesses

7.2.1 Resistance to change

According to Unilever's chief marketing officer, Simon Clift, one of the problems in establishing a digital culture is that many of the best marketers and agencies have made their name through TV commercials. Many digital agencies also criticise that people in senior marketing roles at Unilever tend to be more comfortable with traditional mediums such as TV. Clift also notes how people responsible for digital media are often more junior people, who do not necessarily have the power or budget to establish this digital culture.

7.2.2 Missing technological capability

When Unilever did a brand integration for Dove Cool Moisture body wash on NBC's 'The Apprentice', Dove's website crashed due to high traffic. This revealed Unilever's weakness in technological capability. Consequently, Unilever has partnered with AOL and Yahoo among others to build and operate sites. (Neff, 2008) However, technological skills and capability still are missing in many of Unilever's operating companies and brands.

8. Improvements to create greater customer value

8.1 Collaboration with retail customers

In order to create customer value, Unilever should work in collaboration with its retail customers.

For instance, launching a summer campaign with Tesco, Unilever could put QR codes on its Ben &

Jerry's[9] ice-cream tubs that lead to Tesco's web site, where the customer can claim a reward (e.g.

a coupon) against the promotional code on the ice-cream pack. In addition to building Ben &

Jerry's brand, it creates **direct value to the retail customer by bringing consumers to its website**.

Because the consumer never comes directly into contact with Unilever brands, but rather with its

individual brands, Unilever does not lose by directing the consumer to its customer's website

(MarketLine, 2012). This also creates a chance for the retailers to increase their number of loyal

shoppers.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Company description of Unilever

Unilever is one of the world's largest fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies and

operates through a large number of subsidiaries that offer products under various brand names

including Ben & Jerry's, Axe (Lynx), Dove, Flora, Omo and Lipton. Unilever NV and Unilever PLC are

the two parent companies of the Unilever Group, listed on the London Stock Exchange and

Euronext Amsterdam. The group categorises its brands into four segments, which are Foods,

Refreshments, Personal Care and Home Care. The company primarily operates in Europe, the

Americas, Asia and Africa. According to MarketLIne (2013) Unilever employed about 173,000

people as of December 31, 2012. (MarketLine, 2013; Global Company Intelligence, 2014)

The customers of Unilever include mass merchandisers, grocery stores, membership club stores,

drug stores and high-frequency retail stores. Although being a highly vertically integrated

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[9] Ben & Jerry's brand is owned by Unilever

company, Unilever buys the majority of its raw and packaged materials from others. (Global Company Intelligence, 2014)

In 2013, the group recorded revenues of €49,797.00 million (∼$69,000 million) with an operating profit of €7,517 million (Unilever, 2013; MarketLine, 2013).
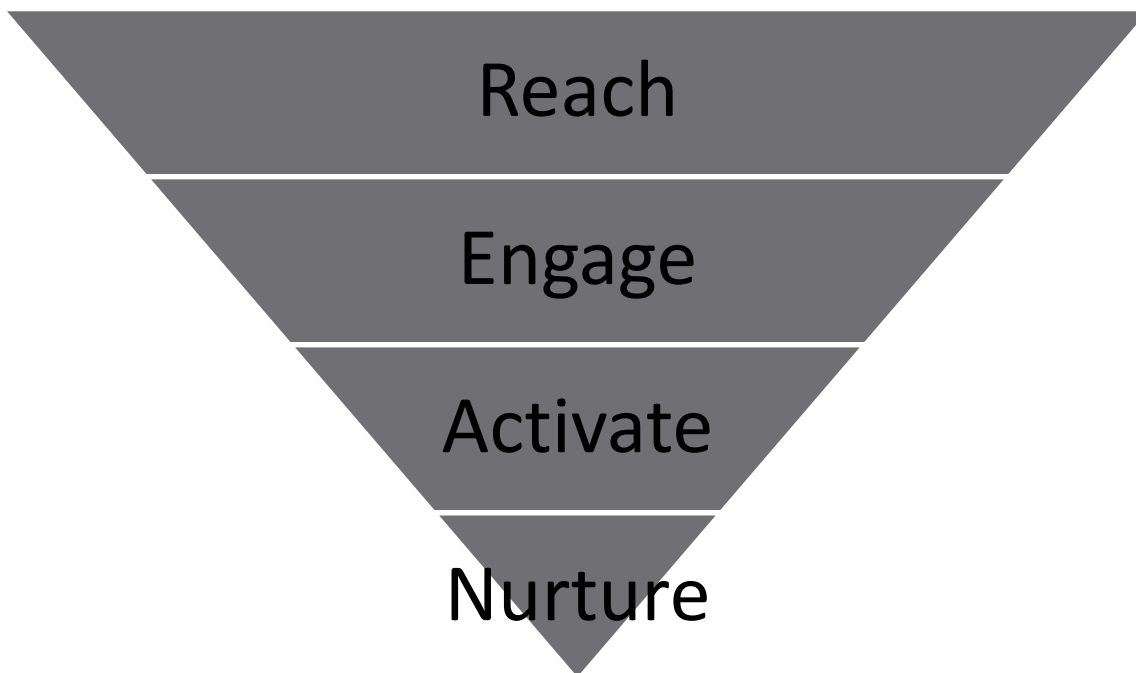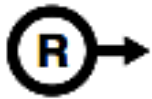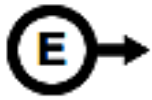
Appendix 2 – REAN model

**Figure 4. Adapted from Jackson (2009).**

R → Reach sources, the methods you use to attract people to your offer. It also includes how you raise awareness among your target audience about your offer.

E → Engage, is how people interact with your business. Engage is essentially the process before a point of action that helps your prospect come to a decision.

A → Activate means a person has taken a preferred point of action. Typical examples include a person purchasing a product, a newsletter subscription or a sign-up.
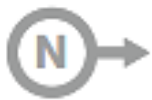
N → Nurture describes the method of retaining and re-engaging with activated consumers. The consumer is a person that has already taken at least one preferred point of action.

Figure 5. Source (Jackson, 2009).

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