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# **The use of AI in sales funnel management in international companies**

International Business

Bachelor's thesis

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The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service. Artificial intelligence (ChatGPT) was used in the ideation phase of this thesis. See Appendix 1 for a detailed report on the use of AI in the making of this thesis.

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During the past few years artificial intelligence (AI) has become a focal point of academic discourse and research. The possibilities of using AI as a tool in enhancing various business processes is considered a wide-ranging trend in the globalized business world. The amount of companies using AI in their business operations has in fact doubled during the recent years which can be explained with the variety of AI technologies available that can be curated to meet individual companies' unique needs. The question that many companies face is how they can profit most from using AI.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the use of AI in sales funnel management in international companies. The sources, results and findings of this thesis are based on academic literature provided by the University of Turku. This thesis commences with an overview of the most recent developments and trends in the international business environment including the breakthrough of AI. The theory section of this thesis begins with examining the sales funnel framework that is widely acknowledged and used in structuring companies' customer acquisition activities. In order to foster a deeper understanding of the phenomenon the customer journey framework is presented together with the sales funnel. The customer journey analysis brings insights from the customer's perspective of the purchasing journey whereas sales funnel pictures the company's view. Together the two frameworks explain the customer's purchasing journey from the initial awareness to purchase and beyond. The stages of the sales funnel are presented in detail in order to point out the possible stages where AI can make difference.

The findings of this thesis demonstrate the transforming power of AI in sales and marketing related tasks. Emphasizing that the use of AI is most efficient in repeatable, routine and standard tasks. Regarding customer acquisition inside sales funnels the most pivotal points are prospecting and conversion. The findings of this thesis underline the possibilities of AI in lead prospecting and lead conversion. In these points of the sales funnel AI can significantly decrease the workload of sales organizations. For instance, data analysis, machine learning and personalisation can be used to make lead prospecting more efficient. Many sales tasks still require human intelligence which is why AI is often used as a human intelligence augmentation tool. Despite the numerous advantages of artificial intelligence, the need for human intelligence is inevitable. The findings of this thesis highlight that the disparities in companies and countries finances and other resources have a huge impact on the scale that AI is adopted in a company's operations. When a company operates internationally the amount of prospect customers increases and diversifies which is why companies need efficient sales and marketing processes and therefore well-functioning sales funnels.

**Key words:** Artificial Intelligence, Sales funnel, Management, Customer journey

## Kandidaatintutkielma

**Oppiaine:** Kansainvälinen liiketoiminta

**Tekijä:** Iida Vauhkonen

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Viime vuosien aikana tekoäly on noussut keskeiseksi akateemisen keskustelun ja tutkimuksen kohteeksi. Yleinen trendi kansainvälisessä liiketoimintaympäristössä on ollut tarkastella tekoälyn tarjoamia mahdollisuuksia liiketoiminnan tehostamiseen. Tekoälyä hyödyntävien yritysten määrä onkin lähes tuplaantunut viime vuosien aikana, mikä selittyy osittain sillä, että tekoälyn mahdollistamien teknologioiden määrä on kasvussa ja niitä voidaan räätälöidä yksittäisten yritysten tarpeisiin. Keskeisintä yrityksille on kuitenkin ymmärtää, miten tekoälyä voidaan hyödyntää tehokkaasti.

Tämän tutkielman tarkoitus on tutkia tekoälyn käyttöä myyntisuppilon hallinnassa kansainvälisissä yrityksissä. Tutkielman lähteet, tulokset ja havainnot perustuvat pitkälti Turun Yliopiston tarjoamaan akateemiseen kirjallisuuteen. Tutkielman alussa on katsaus tämän hetkisestä kansainvälisestä liiketoimintaympäristöstä mukaan lukien tekoälyn mukanaan tuomat teknologia trendit. Tutkielman ensimmäisessä teoriaosiossa tarkastellaan myyntisuppiloa, joka on laajasti tunnettu työkaluna, joka tukee ja auttaa hahmottamaan asiakashankinta prosessia. Kokonaisvaltaisen ostopolun ymmärtämisen edistämiseksi myyntisuppiloa käsitellään yhdessä asiakaspolun kanssa. Asiakaspolkuanalyysi tuo asiakkaan näkökulmaa ostoprosessista, kun taas myyntisuppilo kuvaa yrityksen näkökulmaa. Yhdessä nämä kaksi teoreettista viitekehystä kuvaavat asiakkaan matkaa aina ensimmäisestä kosketuspisteestä lopulliseen ostopäätökseen. Myyntisuppilon vaiheet esitellään tutkielmassa yksityiskohtaisesti, jotta voidaan osoittaa keskeiset suppilon vaiheet, missä tekoälyn käytöstä on potentiaalisesti hyötyä.

Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat tekoälyn merkittävän roolin myynti- ja markkinointitehtävien tehostamisessa etenkin rutiininomaisissa, toistuvissa ja standarditehtävissä. Asiakashankinnan näkökulmasta merkittävimmät kohdat myyntisuppilossa ovat prospektointi sekä konversio. Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat tekoälyn mahdollisuudet etenkin liidien prospektoinnissa sekä konversiossa, sillä näissä vaiheissa tekoäly voi merkittävästi vähentää myyntiorganisaatioiden työkuormaa. Esimerkiksi, hyödyntämällä data-analyysia, koneoppimista ja personointia voidaan tehostaa liidien prospektointia ja sitä kautta parantaa myyntisuppiloa. Monet myyntitehtävät vaativat edelleen ihmisen älykkyyttä, minkä vuoksi tekoälyä käytetään usein täydentävänä työkaluna. Tutkielman tulokset havainnollistivat yritysten ja eri maiden välisten resurssierojen keskeisen vaikutuksen mahdollisuuksiin hyödyntää tekoälyä sekä siihen, minkälaisessa mittakaavassa tekoäly pystytään sisällyttämään yrityksen toimintaan. Yrityksen toimiessa kansainvälisesti tarve tehokkaalle myynnille- ja markkinoinnille korostuu, sillä mahdollisten asiakkaiden määrä kasvaa ja monipuolistuu, minkä vuoksi tarvitaan tehokas myyntisuppilo.

**Avainsanat:** Tekoäly, Myyntisuppilo, Hallinta, Ostopolku, Asiakaspolku

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The global business environment is highly competitive, and organizations have to adapt new strategies in order to establish and retain their position in the market. The integration of global business together with rapid technological development has created many opportunities to seek business operations across borders. Global markets offer great opportunities for companies to expand their operations. In order to succeed in a new market there has to be a clear strategy and understanding of the new area of operation. According to Kotler et al. (2024, 21) the current global business environment is highly customer centric. Due to the high global competition consumers have greater influence in the market that allows them to switch suppliers if the quality of the product or service does not meet their standards.

This so-called market paradigm change implies the shift between the buyers (consumers) and sellers (companies) dynamics, which has led to the most successful companies to be the ones that know their customers best (Kotler et al., 2024, 64). The trend in consuming has shifted towards using services and continuously seeking to create experiences instead of merely purchasing goods. Consumers are longing for resonating interactions with companies they do business with. The latter has led to the need to create a deep understanding of factors that create value to customers. Customer value creation involves the understanding of customer preferences, values and a holistic view of the customer journey. (Ford, 2025, 1.) The understanding of prospect customers is vital to companies since it allows them make decisions that support the customer acquisition processes and inevitably grow their customer base.

A significant way to create a profound understanding of consumers in today's business environment is using customer data and analysis. The most recent technological advancement artificial intelligence (AI) has altered the global business environment drastically. According to McKinsey & Company (2022) the use of AI in business operations has doubled since 2017 widely because AI technologies can now be customized to every company's unique needs. AI offers many tools that can enhance numerous processes of a company operating in the digitalized business environment. AI is also seen as an efficient instrument in answering complex challenges when operating business globally. (Menzies et al., 2024, 186.) In the rapidly digitalized business environment, the potential enhancements provided by AI have been widely acknowledged. The consensus in using AI in business operations is that it requires proper knowledge on how it can be used to reach its full

potential. Disparities in companies' resources and economic state of different geographical areas result in the fact that AI is not yet fully available for all. In order to use AI to its fullest potential requires structural planning and resources, finances and knowledge. It is relevant for businesses to know how they can benefit from emerging artificial intelligence technologies. The efficient use of AI requires the knowledge on how to implement these tools in a company's business operations. AI can be used in various commercial activities, but one of the largest positive effects on revenues from the use of AI has been found in marketing and sales (McKinsey & Company, 2022). The aim of this thesis is to study the use of AI in sales funnels management in international companies. In order to answer the aim of this thesis the subquestions below will be studied:

- What are sales funnels?
- What is sales funnel management?
- How can AI technologies enhance the sales funnel?

The theoretical frameworks of this thesis are presented in chapters 2 & 3. In the first theory chapter the sales funnel is determined and studied through the key stages of the funnel. Academical literature on sales funnel management remains limited with a specific focus either on B2B sales or more scarcely on B2C sales. For that matter this thesis studies sales funnels on a general level pointing out the major disparities of the two if necessary. The sales funnel is a widely known theoretical framework used to study the stages of customer acquisition. As the academic literature on sales funnel management remains limited this thesis examines the customer journey as a supporting theoretical framework to foster a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, the main aspects of sales funnel management are introduced. The second theory chapter focuses on the possible enhancements that AI has to offer in the context of international marketing and sales funnel management. The focus being on the most important points in the funnel in terms of customer acquisition. The enhancements provided by AI are reflected to these stages of the sales funnel in order to outline the interconnection between the two subjects. The fourth chapter of this thesis provides the conclusion of this thesis where the main aspects of this thesis will be tied together. This thesis is a literature review that uses academic journals and articles incorporated in the Scopus and Volter databases provided by the University of Turku.

## 2 Understanding sales funnels

### 2.1 What is a sales funnel?

Peter Drucker once wrote that the main purpose of a company is to create a customer. Customer creation includes identifying and understanding the needs, hopes and demands of customers and adapting the company's offering to these needs. (Drucker, 1973, 61.) The process of creating and managing future customers can be divided into stages that together form the sales funnel. The sales funnel is a framework that describes the customer journey through the purchasing process, from the initial awareness to purchase decision and beyond (Terho et al., 2023, 339–340). In other terms, the sales funnel categorises potential customers of the company based on their purchasing stage (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, 166).

Like a real-life funnel it is wide in the opening, and it narrows on its way down. The top of the funnel represents all the possible future customers of a company that move towards the bottom through various touchpoints with the company to become customers. The goal is to get majority of the prospects to move all the way down the funnel to become paying customers. (Rabhan, 2013, 23.) The process of a customer's purchase decision can be studied via many different theoretical frameworks. The most recent ways for studying sales funnels generally include three broad approaches: artificial intelligence in enhancing and automating customer acquisition and retention related tasks (Paschen et al., 2020), predictive analytics in optimising leads (Terho et al., 2023) and customer journey analysis focusing on consumer behaviour (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The sales funnel describes the customer's journey from the first touchpoint with the company all the way down to making the purchasing decision. To understand the sales funnel, the key stages of the funnel need to be determined. Generally, the sales funnel consists of four different stages. Even though the sales funnel is widely acknowledged in business, the exact form and number of stages in the funnel vary depending on the study (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, 166). Business-to-business companies' sales funnels are generally more complex than business-to-consumer funnels. The difference can be explained with the higher number of processes needed in business-to-business sales to complete transactions. (Yu & Cai, 2007, 345.) According to D'haen and Van den Poel (2013, 545) the sales funnel consists of suspects, prospects, leads and customers. The term funnel is used figuratively in sales funnel management to characterize the mass of consumers that flow through the funnel. In the sales funnel everyone does not make it to the bottom. In fact, the majority of people disappear in the middle of the funnel (Rabhan, 2013, 23). The top of the funnel includes

all the suspects (largest pool of people) that may become a prospect customer then turn in to leads and finally customers (smallest pool of people). The typical sales funnel stages are described in Figure 1 provided below.

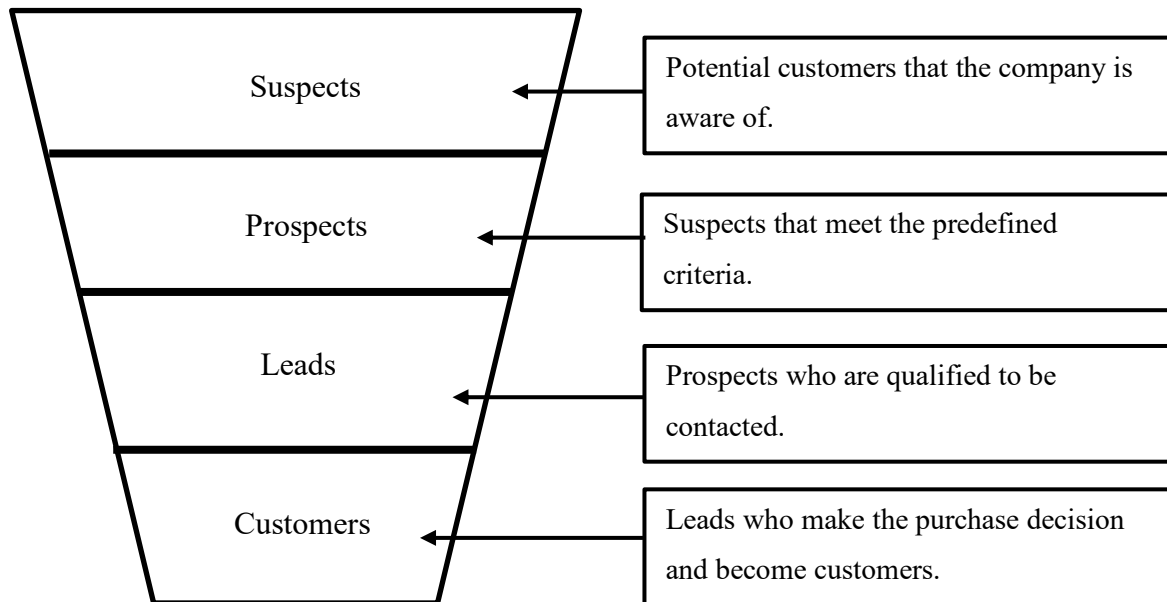


Figure 1: Sales funnel framework (adapted from D'haen & Van den Poel, 2013)

The top of the sales funnel illustrates the list of suspects that are all the potential customers that the company is aware off. Suspects are then qualified by predefined characteristics that turns them into prospects that prioritases them from other suspects. The next step is prospects turning into leads. Leads are prospects that will contact the company and most likely engage with the company. Finally the leads who make the purchase decision become customers of the company. (D'haen & Van den Poel, 2013, 545.) None of the sales funnel stages are static which means that the stages evolve and differ throughout the process. The iterative nature of the sales funnel process empasizes the evolvment of the different stages of the funnel. (D'haen & Van den Poel, 2013, 545.)

To achieve a well-functioning sales funnel the proportions of the funnel need to be in balance. According to Rabhan (2013, 25) by using conversion rate optimising techniques, the bottom of the sales funnel can be widened out. In terms of customer acquisition this means that by bringing more people into the bottom of the sales funnel conversion rates increase. The funnel itself suggests that a lot more has to go in at the top of the funnel that what comes out of the funnel (Patterson, 2007, 187). The latter emphasizes the need to reach as many suspects as possible that can be turned into prospects, leads and finally customers. Reducing unnecessary processes and adding necessary steps to the funnel

can help the company finalise the ideal funnel shape. (Rabhan, 2013, 25–26.) The top of the funnel represents all the prospects that the company aims to transform into leads which requires the company's understanding of how people will enter the funnel. The middle includes the all the things that need to be done to reach the goal to turn as many prospects as possible into paying customers. The bottom of the funnel represents the end goal of a company's sales funnel. (D'haen & Van den Poel, 2013, 545; Rabhan, 2013, 26.) The shape of the funnel defined by the number of prospects transforming through every stage of the funnel reflects the effectiveness and state of the sales funnel (Söhnchen & Albers, 2010, 1363).

## **2.2 Sales funnel explained through the customer journey**

To understand the sales funnel more profoundly it is conducive to utilise other frameworks of the phenomenon that include more insights of the nature of each stage. One way to specify the stages of the sales funnel is characterising the stages by applying the customer journey. These cognitive stages include awareness, discovery, evaluation, intention and purchase (Vieira & Claro, 2020, 4–5). Stage one, awareness includes consumers who have already paid attention to the product or service provided by the company, but at this stage they have little or no information about the company's offering, followed by the discovery stage where consumers are now interested in basic information such as price and other specific information of the product or service. Leading to the stages of evaluation and intention where the consumer expresses interest in testing the product or service and demonstrate a high level of interest in purchasing. Lastly the purchase decision where the consumer has made the decision to buy the product or service. The possibility of remaining loyal to a certain company after purchasing is relatively high which explains why the final stage following purchase is often considered as the loyal customer stage. (Court et al., 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76.) Figure 2 provided below demonstrates the customer journey through the stages of the sales funnel.

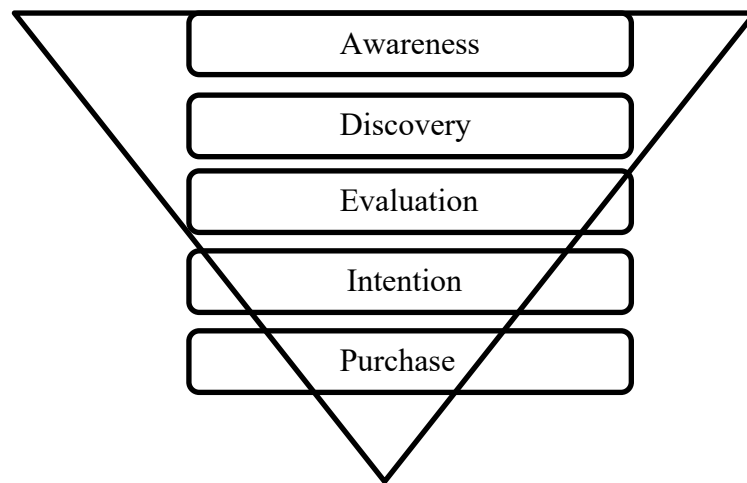


Figure 2: Customer journey through the stages of the sales funnel (adapted from Vieira & Claro, 2020)

Customer journey analysis examines the customer's interaction with various touchpoints with the company moving through the sales funnel including careful consideration, comparison, search, purchase and post-purchase behaviour (Verhoef et al., 2016, 199). The goal of analysing the customer journey is to create a deep understanding of the customer's decision-making process and evaluation in different points of the buying process. The focus of customer journey analysis should primarily be on the touchpoints that the company itself can have the most influence on. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 78.) The customer journey analysis brings crucial insights of the customer's perspective on the purchasing process that helps in creating a deeper understanding of sales funnel framework. To understand the customer journey more thoroughly the three constructive stages of customer journey need to be introduced. According to Lemon & Verhoef (2016, 76) the stages of the customer journey are divided to prepurchase, purchase and post-purchase.

The prepurchase stage includes all the aspects of the customer's interaction with the company before making the purchasing decision. The pre-purchase has also been characterised with behaviours such as need recognition, consideration and information seeking (see Figure 2). The second stage is the purchase. Purchasing stage consists of all the interactions the customer has had with with the company during the purchase transaction itself. The purchase stage is described with behaviours like intention, choice and purchase payment (see Figure 2). The purchase stage demonstrates the process of a consumer recognising their need and subsequently fulfilling it. The post-purchase stage explains the

interactions of the customer with the company after purchasing. Post-purchase covers behaviour like consumption, service request and post-purchase engagement. The post-purchase stage is the only touchpoint that relates to the actual product or service. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76.)

The increasing focus on customer journey and customer experience analysis can be explained with the complexity of customer journeys. Customers interact with a company through numerous touch points via different channels and platforms. Touch points represent all of the interaction and communication between a customer and a company. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 69.) The complexity of customer journeys has made the management of customer experience and the customer purchase journey more difficult since companies have less control over the journey (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013, 25–26). Due to the variety of marketing channels and sales platforms the process of becoming a customer is not a linear process but rather a looping phenomena where customers move back and forth (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The touchpoints are pivotal in creating a coherent customer journey. The total of different touchpoints among the customer journey effect each other and evidently have a direct or indirect effect in the consumers purchasing decision and the process of prospects becoming paying customers (Koch & Hartmann, 2023, 1519).

Companies are increasingly interested in developing a holistic understanding of the entire customer journey. Digitalization and most recently AI has made it attainable to collect precise data from customer touchpoints which has helped companies understand the entity of sales funnels from an individual customer's perspective. Understanding the customer journey is incredibly valuable for companies, since it allows them to follow and guide the consumer by providing the right information, promotion and service at the correct stage of the sales funnel. For instance in the awareness stage of the customer journey an exposure to a company's promotion would be sufficient. By monitoring the effectiveness of different touchpoints along the customer journey the company can adjust their tactics to create conversion, in other words create customers (Ma & Sun, 2020, 490.) By comprehending the interconnection between the customer journey and sales funnel, companies can avoid wasted resources and allocate marketing and sales resources in the touchpoints that have the biggest influence. Improving each stage of the sales funnel companies can increase their conversion rates and ultimately their total revenue (Vieira & Claro, 2020, 6).

## 2.3 Sales funnel management

A key objective in managing sales funnels is recognising the activities that are required in each stage of the funnel for it to be efficient. Effective sales funnel measuring provides companies critical information that can be utilised to improve sales performance. (Conde, 2025, 1.) The metrics used to examine the effectiveness of sales funnel usually include e.g. conversion percentages, the average deal size and cost-per-lead statistics. Customers are treasured assets for a company, but they can be costly to acquire and retain (Villanueva et al., 2008, 48). The latter emphasizes the need for tracking the efficiency of customer acquisition. The possibility of making mistakes in forming a sales funnel is common, which explains the constant need to track the effectiveness of sales processes. The application of sales funnels allows the company's management to rely on collected data instead of intuition. (Griva et al., 2023, 2.)

The sales funnel figure itself illustrates that the customer acquisition is a process where a large mass of consumers is transitioned into paying customers. According to Roff-Marsh (2004) companies should treat the sales funnel process like a production process where a series of coordinated activities convert materials (leads) into finished goods (customers). This approach suggests that companies need to have a clear structured plan of the marketing and sales functions that foster the sales funnels efficiency. According to Patterson (2007, 187) sales funnel management offers insights to which marketing and sales processes are effective and increase the purchase flow, as well as describing how efficiently prospect customers move along the funnel. A company's total value can be increased by systematic customer acquisition management. When the amount of acquired new customers exceeds the rate of lost customers companies can keep growing their customer base. Studying sales funnel management is important to companies since ineffective decisions in the process of customer acquisition can decrease the overall value of a company over time. (Hansotia & Wang, 1997, 8–9.)

According to Patterson (2007, 187) sales funnel management is management of opportunities. Every prospect customer is a new opportunity. The first task in using the sales funnel is to incorporate it into the customer buying process. Building a healthy sales funnel requires deep understanding on customers' needs and their buying process. Consequently, the sales funnel is not solely a sales team tool. When designed properly the sales funnel can work as a tool that connects marketing and sales performance. Marketing plays an important role in bringing prospect customers into the funnel. The responsibility of identifying, finding and securing profitable customers is in the hands of marketing. Marketing also provides customer targeting, positioning and communications that aim to differentiate the company from competitors. For instance, marketing campaigns are designed, constructed and

executed to attract new prospects into the sales funnel. (Patterson, 2007, 187.) Therefore, both marketing and sales play a crucial role in creating the purchasing journey and evidently customer acquisition. Managing the sales funnel and customer journeys should focus on touch points that the company itself has an impact on. The brand-owned touchpoints are customer interactions along the purchasing decision journey that are designed and managed by the company. Including all brand-owned media such as advertising and company websites. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 78.)

According to Moncrief and Marshall (2005, 15) prospecting is a method for requiring new customers and potential customers. As stated previously prospecting is one of the key stages of the sales funnel and it usually includes methods like referrals, networking and cold canvassing of prospect customers. Referrals and networking includes using previous knowledge on existing customers to gain insights of new and potential customers. Cold canvassing on the other hand means salespersons direct contact with potential customers without prior connection also known as door-to-door selling. The prospecting stage has often been described as the most arduous and difficult part of the customer acquisition process. (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005, 15; Harrison et al., 2014, 196.) Nowadays prospecting activities are performed primarily through technology and to some extent telemarketing. Technological improvements have allowed companies to become more efficient and reduce costs in the prospecting stage by freeing salespersons to focus on other sales functions. For instance, the internet has allowed the prospect customers to make the first move by approaching the company before talking to salespeople e.g. by engaging in digital content or visiting company websites. (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005, 16.)

The main goal after prospecting is turning leads into paying customers (Gopalakrishna et al., 2022, 917). In the sales funnel this represents the activities that lead to prospects closing the sale and becoming customers. In order for a prospect to become a customer the company needs to nurture the prospect customers through high quality communication by providing the prospect with more information or solve existing problems. In this stage the company aims to overcome any possible reason the prospect customer may have not to buy the product or service and move along sales funnel to become a customer. According to Paschen et al. (2020, 410) a prospect customers unwillingness to buy may be reflected in their concerns about the company, delivery methods, competitors, price or simply the actual product or service. In practice this could lead to salespersons attempt through predefined needs recognition or calls to define precisely what it is that the prospect customer wants and needs from the product (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005, 17).

Closing the sale and converting a prospect to a customer includes the goals being met to both parties of the sale. Nowadays this does not simply mean the purchase of a product or a service but instead a successful realization of the needs and goals of both parties to their relationship in the long run. The focus has shifted towards creating customer lifetime value emphasising the mutual benefits achieved through the sales. (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005, 17.) After purchasing the company's proceeds to the follow-up stage also known as post-purchase stage. The follow-up is required to strengthen the relationship between the company and customer. (Paschen et al. 2020, 410). Typically, a follow-up is an email. Sending an email as a follow-up has been recognised as a quick, easy and efficient way to contact the customer after the purchase. Sending a follow-up email also allows the customer to contact the selling company easily if questions arise. (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005, 18.)

When a company operates across borders the amount of prospect customers grows and their preferences, needs and purchasing behaviour diversifies which is why companies need to have a well defined and efficient sales funnel. Acquiring customers across borders and managing the sales funnel internationally comes with need to understand various cultural dimensions. As stated previously the marketing actions of a company are behind the flow of new prospects into the sales funnel. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the cultural differences when approaching new prospect customers. The management of sales funnels internationally includes frequent communication with the prospect customers of the company. According to Zhao et al. (2024, 8) the more there is communication between a company and its prospect customers, the greater the interest of a individual customer, which influences their purchasing decision and becoming a customer. According to Hofstede et al. (2010) the cultural background of a customer shapes their perception, evaluation, choices and sensitivity to social influences, norms and engagement behaviours. The latter explains the inevitable differences in customers purchasing journeys across different countries. In practice operating internationally means incorporating the cultural differences into a company's marketing strategy. Efficient international marketing takes into account cultural differences ensuring that prospect customers resonate with the company by avoiding unnecessary misunderstandings and offenses.

### **3 AI technologies enhancing sales funnels**

Defining AI is often found a rather difficult task since the concept of artificial intelligence has been determined in various different ways. Artificial intelligence has been studied for decades without a generally accepted definition. A frequent way to approach AI is referring it to human intelligence. According to Gardner (1999, 33–34) human intelligence is the biopsychological ability to process information and solve problems. AI has also been characterised as a combination of numerous technologies that together enable a machine to do tasks that usually require human intelligence (Tambe et al., 2019, 16). The article by Kaplan and Haenlein (2019) defines artificial intelligence as a system's ability to define external data correctly, learn from that data and use the learnings from the data to achieve certain defined tasks. Artificial intelligence uses information from databases such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and other big data sources to complete tasks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019, 17). The external information is then used to analyse hidden patterns and rules with the help of machine learning. Machine learning is a fundamental part of artificial intelligence. Evidently AI is considered more extensive than machine learning since artificial intelligence has the ability to understand data for instance language processing and voice recognition. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019, 17.)

#### **3.1 The use of AI in different stages of the sales funnel**

Artificial intelligence technologies can be used in a high number of different commercial activities (OECD, 2022, 5). In the context of the aim of this thesis the focus is on the use of AI in marketing and sales tasks. AI technologies can have a significant impact on personalisation and the improvement of customer experience, while making more specific predictions about customers for targeted advertising (OECD, 2022, 5). Artificial intelligence has become a valuable tool in the field of marketing and it is rearranging the common practises of marketing (Gao & Liu, 2023, 664–665). AI is helping marketers understand customers better than before and it can work as a bridge between the business and the prospect customer by providing vast amounts of information (Paschen et al., 2019, 1416).

In sales funnel management AI can help reduce tasks that previously required human intelligence. AI can be utilised in various stages of the sales funnel. According to Leyer and Schneider (2021, 712) AI can play two different roles in order to enhance sales processes: human augmentation and human automation. Human augmentation suggests that human decision makers remain present in decision making processes whereas human automation suggests replacing human roles with technology and

AI carried tasks (Leyer & Schneider, 2021, 715). In sales funnel management AI can enhance the stages of the funnel by learning from existing data, assist salespersons and potentially even take over human tasks. Considering AI's enormous capacity for processing information AI can augment human intelligence or replace structured and repeatable human tasks in sales processes (Paschen & et al., 2020, 412). Since AI offers such a vast number of opportunities, this thesis will emphasize the use of AI on the most pivotal points of the sales funnel in terms of customer acquisition. This chapter will focus on the use of AI in prospecting leads and converting them into customers along the sales funnel. The enhancements provided by AI presented in this thesis represent mainly human augmentation.

### 3.1.1 Prospecting leads

According to Gopalakrishna et al. (2022, 917) customer acquisition consists of two distinct activities that play major parts in the sales funnel, prospecting and conversion. The vast majority of academic literature on the use on AI in sales funnel management emphasizes the possibilities of AI in enhancing lead generation and management. One of the most enormous advances in the sales funnel process is using machine learning and AI in turning leads into paying customers (Syam & Sharma, 2018, 142). Prospecting which is also known as lead generation is about finding potential customers (see Figure 1). Prospecting includes finding the potential customer and qualifying them based on their characteristics like the probability that they are going to buy. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, 166; Syam & Sharma, 2018, 140.) Lead qualification can benefit remarkably from efficiencies of automation powered by machine learning and AI (Syam & Sharma, 2018, 142). Prospecting generally starts by the company getting first pieces of information of the prospect lead. For instance, when a prospect visits the company's website after engaging with digital content or submitting a sales enquiry, he or/she provides the company their contact information. Additionally, the information provided through the prospect's browsing on the website can provide useful data about potential future leads and their interests. (Paschen et al., 2020, 406.)

This information is then used to narrow the number of prospects to the ones that are more likely to purchase. Prospect scoring also known as qualifying leads is a challenging task that requires human intelligence, since the identification of high-quality leads is difficult. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, 166.) AI can bring significant value to this stage of the sales funnel by building a list of profiles on the prospect customers based on previous data. By finding similarities in data and engagement patterns AI can make predictive lead qualification. (Paschen et al., 2020, 407.) AI can use the data received through prospect engagement for instance through emails to segment the prospects based on their current interest, keywords and themes that occur (Paschen & et al., 2020, 408). The information

that is received through prospect customers engaging with digital content can be used to generate profiles of prospects based on AI enabled personalisation. AI enabled personalisation relies heavily on machine learning algorithms (Ma & Sun, 2020, 490).

Despite the critical significance of lead qualifying for successful customer acquisition, the process encompasses many challenges like inadequate lead quality, lack of lead information or the disputes on lead quality between sales and marketing representatives (Sabnis et al., 2013, 52). Lack of leads and lead quality issues can be detrimental since they prevent the company's ability to convert leads into customers (move along the sales funnel) which results in wasted resources and failure in new customer acquisition (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, 167). AI can significantly improve the qualification of high-quality leads through machine learning and personalisation. The most common way to define the quality of a lead is their propensity to buy. By enhancing lead management, the sales funnel can reach higher conversion rates. (Syam & Sharma 2018, 142.) In other words, by using AI powered technologies the company's leads can be chosen more specifically based on data which increases the possibility of them converting into paying customers. By qualifying high quality leads early on, companies can make the sales funnel more efficient.

### 3.1.2 Lead conversion

Lead conversion is the point of the sales funnel where leads are converted into customers (see Figure 1). The progress in the sales funnel requires the full attention of salespeople to try and close a sale with a prospect. This approach suggest that the outcome of lead prospecting (a qualified lead) is the input to conversion. (Gopalakrishna et al., 2022, 919.) In other words, for the conversion to happen the lead qualification has to be accomplished successfully. AI has the capability of using previous data of prospect customers to analyse and determine which characteristics in prospects behaviour have the highest probability of resulting in conversion (Syam & Sharma, 2018, 142). When a lead emerges the holistic view of the customer journey helps companies map out the process that leads him/ her through the purchasing journey. Executing the process firms monitor the actual touchpoints across different channels and platforms to assess and adjust tactics to create conversion. (Ma & Sun, 2020, 490.)

Lead conversion craves engaging with the prospect customer through different platforms. In order to convert leads into paying customers companies have to focus on nurturing the leads that have the most potential in becoming a customer. Converting leads into customers is highly related to successful customer experience. In the final stage of sales funnels the largest impact of AI may be considered an indirect one. Improving efficiency and productivity in all the previous stages of the

funnel with AI powered technologies can boost the conversion stage. (Fehrenbach et al., 2025, 18.) There are some tasks that AI systems can take over in the last stage of the sales funnel. Chatbots exemplify AI solutions that can improve lead conversion as they can answer the most common questions that arise (Paschen et al., 2020, 410). AI can also be used to compose a variety of sales supporting materials in the form of text, audio or visuals. In practice this could mean a simple personalised e-mail or even complex sales pitches including brochures. According to Fehrenbach et al. (2025, 18) these sales supporting AI generated content can foster a deeper communicative connection between the company and the lead, ultimately increasing conversion rates. The more complex the tasks are in the conversion stage also known as the bottom of the sales funnel the involvement of sales representatives is required. Interpersonal skills are still relayed on profoundly in the purchasing stage by sales representatives, to build trust and engage communication between the lead (Paschen et al., 2020, 410.) The need for human intelligence in the purchasing stage highlights that in this stage of the funnel AI is acting as a human augmentation efficiency tool not human automation.

After the lead converts into a customer the company proceeds to the so called after-purchase stage. After making the purchase the new customer should be contacted with a follow-up (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005, 17). AI can foster more efficient follow-up strategies. Utilising the detailed information from previous data provided by AI, can significantly help salespersons have a deeper understanding of customer needs. By integrating previous data knowledge into follow-up strategies companies can become more efficient for instance in identifying inconsistencies in customer behaviour and anticipating arising customer needs and evidently strengthening the relationship between the customer and the company. In practice this could mean sending a follow-up email to the customer with answering the most recently asked questions concerning the product they have purchased before the customer recognises their need. (Paschen et al. 2020, 411.)

AI technologies act a major role in supporting different selling functions. The benefits of automation and AI technologies has been and will attain routine, repeatable and standard tasks. The greatest impact of digitalization enabled technologies in sales processes will go in the activities and efforts that enhance the understanding of customer behaviour in order to design and provide highly customised offerings. So, in the future digital technologies will act as an active decision facilitator or possibly even form decisions together with salespeople to enhance the effectiveness of the decision making. (Syam & Sharma, 2018, 145.) In order to make the use of AI efficient managers need to assure the facilitation of AI technologies properly. Offering support to the company's salespeople in interpreting AI generated information. In AI enabled sales funnel management this means that AI can

help create, organize and use information but it is up to humans to analyse the information for bizarre outputs or inconsistencies. (Paschen et al., 2020, 411.)

According to Kopalle et al. (2022, 523) the global impact of AI technologies in marketing and sales operations is strongly altered by a number of country, company and consumer factors. Advanced AI technologies are costly which explains that most of the leading companies in AI technologies are located in developed economies (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2021, 156). The inequalities in economic resources together with disparities in digital knowledge divide countries in the use of AI (Kopalle et al., 2022, 523). The latter describes particularly the extent that AI technologies are incorporated in a company's operations. According to Polisetty et al. (2024, 371) the adoption of AI is more likely to take place in companies with innovative culture and open mind to experiment new technology. Another issue in examining the extent of that AI can be incorporated in a company's operations is the size of the company. In comparison a large corporation may face problems with legislation and bureaucracy more frequently than small to medium-sized companies. On the other hand, large corporations may have more resources to invest in proper adoption of AI than small companies. (Polisetty et al., 2024, 384.) The adoption of AI often happens gradually but inevitably the scale and volume of AI powered tools used in a company's operations is highly company specific.

### 3.1.3 Possibilities of AI for international customer acquisition

AI powered language translation together with the use of natural language processing has the potential to significantly enhance cross-cultural communication and negotiation. AI powered language processing offers real-time simultaneous translations that help diminish language barriers and foster stronger collaborative international relationships. (Menziez et al., 2024, 186.) According to (OECD, 2022, 6) AI driven machine translations have been noted as a key factor in lowering language barriers especially in helping export operations. The use of AI in international marketing offers many benefits concerning the brand management and globalization of the company's offering (Kopalle et al., 2022, 524). For instance, the use of AI powered chatbots has been recognised as an activity that drives better customer experience. Using chatbots gives companies the ability to answer questions that arise from customers in real time, and it can have a significant impact in delivering accurate foreign language translations to existing and potential future customers. Additionally, AI has a significant role in aiding the personalisation and customization of customer experiences which is especially beneficial when operating across borders . By tailoring content to meet individual customers' needs and expectations makes the marketing more efficient and reduces wasted resources. (Menziez et al., 2024, 193.) The value brought by AI powered personalisation and machine learning to the management of

sales funnels with AI powered language and translation processes, international businesses can enhance their customer acquisition processes. Using AI powered personalisation together with language translation can enhance international sales funnel management by providing more customised offerings to prospect customers across borders. The total impact of AI in different stages of the customer journey together with efficient sales funnel management can help international businesses control the heterogenous masses of prospect customers. Regardless of the level of AI adoption in a company, the most effective approach to any future AI-marketing integration will be to maintain a balance between AI and human intelligence (Campbell et al., 2020, 241).

## 4 Conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to study the use of AI in sales funnel management in international companies. In order to reach the aim of this thesis the sales funnel framework was examined through its various stages together with the customer journey. The management of sales funnels was studied to foster a deeper understanding of the activities required at each stage of the funnel for successful customer acquisition. The marketing and sales activities along the sales funnel were presented to create an understanding of the practicalities in structuring and managing a successful funnel. The most recent major technological advancement AI and its key capabilities in different stages of the sales funnel were described in order to understand how companies can benefit from AI. Highlighting the stages of prospecting leads and converting leads into paying customers. The international context of this thesis was reflected in the ways AI can be used to tackle the challenges that an international customer base may present. In order to understand the motives for using and creating an efficient sales funnel the major trends and shifts in the current business environment were described.

The findings of this thesis highlight that operating in international markets increases and diversifies the amount of prospect customers which indicates a demand for efficient sales and marketing. A well designed and efficient sales funnel is a great tool to face the challenges presented by an international customer base. The sales funnel is one of the many sales processes where AI can be used to boost efficiency and reduce previously human intelligence required tasks. The results of this thesis emphasize the potential that AI carries in completing repeatable, standard and routine tasks. AI can be used in various different commercial activities including various sales and marketing related tasks. The results of this thesis emphasized the role of AI in enhancing the processes of prospecting leads and converting leads into paying customers. In terms of international sales funnel management AI can help analyze large amounts of data. The impressive capability of AI to analyze data brings advantages to companies operating with international customers since the differences in customer behavior can be identified more efficiently. Additionally having an international customer base the ability to use personalization together with AI powered language translation throughout the sales funnel can help manage the large heterogeneous masses of prospect customers. The results of this thesis underline the role of AI in sales funnel management as a tool that can promote more profound understanding of customer behavior and the needs, preferences and wishes of prospect customers.

To conclude in the future AI will enhance many processes and tasks that previously have required human intelligence. In the management of sales funnels there remains to be tasks that cannot be fully confided to artificial intelligence. Together with human intelligence AI can significantly reduce the

workload from various different stages of the customer acquisition process along the funnel. Academic research on sales funnel management is still quite limited, but the concept is widely acknowledged in business world. In the making of thesis, it was noted that academic literature on sales funnels is rather fragmented. In future research there is definitely room for examining the sales funnel more profoundly to achieve a generally accepted description of the framework. The advantages and challenges related to international sales funnel management is another topic that could be examined in future research. Customer acquisition in international businesses has been studied in academic literature so incorporating the role of sales funnels into the research would be interesting and insightful since it is vastly acknowledged and used in business.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1 Use of Artificial intelligence**

Artificial intelligence (ChatGPT) was used in the ideation phase of this thesis. AI has been used to outline the topic of this thesis. The final headline and subject of this thesis were formed by the author of this thesis. The structure of this thesis was improved by consulting artificial intelligence.

The prompts used in the ideation phase of this thesis:

“How would you improve the current structure of this thesis?”

“Suggest interesting perspectives of sales and marketing related tasks that can benefit from using artificial intelligence?”