

# **Benefits, Antecedents, Buyer Reputation, Buyer Status and Strategic Fit in Relation to the Preferred Customer Status: A Multiple Case Study at Company X and Three of its Key Suppliers**

Author: Daniël van der Vegt  
University of Twente  
P.O. Box 217, 7500AE Enschede  
The Netherlands

## **ABSTRACT**

Over the past few years, more attention has been given to the concept of the preferred customer status. Many academics have conducted studies on a theoretical basis regarding this concept, but have rarely studied this concept in a qualitative way. Therefore, this multiple case study is executed to give a qualitative view of the preferred customer status in relation to different concepts. Next to earlier examined concepts such as benefits, antecedents and drivers of the preferred status, new concepts are researched like buyer reputation, buyer status and strategic fit. The results of the multiple case study confirm a large number of earlier discovered benefits, antecedents and drivers of the preferred status, but also add a number of new factors to the literature such as company name and making good appointments. Regarding the three new concepts, several existing factors have been confirmed such as historical legacy, but also new factors have been added to the literature like trust and brand name. The influences of the new concepts on the preferred customer status differ per supplier. However, multiple suppliers argued together with the buying side that buyer reputation, buyer status and strategic fit have an influence on the preferred customer status.

**Supervisor: Prof. Dr. habil. Holger Schiele**  
**Second supervisor: Frederik Vos**

## **Keywords**

Benefits, antecedents, buyer reputation & status, strategic fit, drivers preferred treatment, buyer-seller relationship, preferred customer status, multiple case study

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# 1. THE PREFERRED CUSTOMER STATUS: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY AT COMPANY X

In the past an increasing number of manufacturing and service firms relied on fewer suppliers and became more closely involved with those remaining suppliers (Cannon & Perreault Jr, 1999, p. 439). This trend continued and therefore buying firms increasingly collaborate with their suppliers and put effort in becoming highly attractive towards their suppliers (Schiele, 2012, p. 44; Schiele, Calvi, & Gibbert, 2012, p. 1178). Special conditions in current supply markets make it necessary to pay increased attention to strategic supply management to guarantee access to key suppliers and to secure tomorrow's competitiveness by becoming a preferred customer of key suppliers (Hüttinger, Schiele, & Veldman, 2012, p. 1194). The amount of theoretical research on the preferred customer status has increased over the years. However, not many academics have researched this phenomenon in a qualitative way. Therefore, a case study at Company X is done. In this paper the benefits, antecedents and drivers of the preferred customer status will be researched in practice and combined with the available literature. This will reinforce or confirm the existing findings on this topic. Next to this, the aspects of buyer reputation, buyer status and strategic fit will be investigated. According to Fombrun & Shanley (1990), reputation can lead to several benefits and it crystallize the statuses of firms within an industrial social system (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990, p. 233). Regarding status, high status organizations are able to gain a competitive advantage in the market (Patterson, Cavazos, & Washington, 2014, p. 75). Strategic fit is seen as a driver to preferred customer status (Bew, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, these aspects could all have an influence on the buyer-supplier relationship, also in relation to the preferred customer status. However, also these aspects have not been researched a lot by academics, especially in a qualitative way. That is why these aspects are also included in this research, to have a qualitative view of buyer reputation, buyer status and strategic fit in relation to the preferred customer status. At the end these aspects will also be combined with the available literature to see if it leads to new insights.

This all will be covered in the next four research questions:

*Q1: What are the benefits, antecedents and drivers of the preferred customer status of Company X with their key suppliers?*

*Q2: Do these benefits, antecedents and drivers found at Company X confirm or add benefits, antecedents and drivers to the available literature?*

*Q3: What is the buyer reputation and buyer status of Company X at their key suppliers and what is the strategic fit between them?*

*Q4: Do these buyer reputation, buyer status and strategic fit confirm or add new insights to the available literature?*

To come to solid answers on these four research questions, the paper is structured in the following way. First a summary of the existing literature on the concept of preferred customer status is given. Also the three new concepts will be described here in relation to the preferred customer status. This is done based on the available literature. Then the research and data collection method of this paper will be described which is used to conduct this study. This will be followed by an introduction of the buying firm Company X. From there the three case studies with the three key suppliers of Company X will be described. This will give insights on the antecedents, benefits, drivers, buyer reputation, buyer status and strategic fit in the three

relationships in relation to the preferred status. The interviews are held with the senior purchasing manager of Company X and three representatives of the key suppliers.

In addition to this, the paper contains a discussion where all the different aspects will be discussed and combined with the available literature. Subsequently, a conclusion about the preferred customer status regarding the case study will be drawn. After this, research contributions will be described and recommendations to Company X will be given. The paper ends with future research and limitations regarding the case study and acknowledgements.

As mentioned before, a summary of the existing literature on the preferred customer status will be described in the next section.

## 2. LITERATURE: THE CONCEPT OF THE PREFERRED CUSTOMER STATUS

### 2.1 Shift in Buyer-Seller Relationship Perspective Leads to Selective Suppliers and Preferred Customer Status

Traditionally, academics as well as practitioners approach buyer-seller relationships with the assumption that to successfully sell products or services, suppliers attempt to become as attractive as possible to (potential) buyers (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1178). This perspective has shifted, where nowadays the phenomenon is that buyers attempt to obtain the best resources from sellers by striving to become more attractive to suppliers (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1178). There are two main reasons why this shift has occurred: 1) a fundamental change in supply chain organizations, e.g. a shift from close to open innovation, which allocates increasing responsibilities to suppliers. 2) Due to a reduction of suppliers in many business-to-business markets, supplier scarcity is caused, which leads at the end to an oligopolistic market structure (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1178). Therefore, regarding this phenomenon, buying firms try to become a preferred customer with their key suppliers. This will happen when a suppliers offers the buyer preferential resource allocation (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1178; Steinle & Schiele, 2008, p. 11). However, most of the innovative supplying firms are only capable of serving a few buying firms, which means they become highly selective (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1178). Therefore, the purchaser of the buying firm must "sell" the organization to their supplier, to build up a close relationship and try to achieve the preferred customer status. This will lead to a competitive advantage (Nollet, Rebollo, & Popel, 2012, p. 1187). This competitive advantage is created due to the fact that a supplier generally "responds first to the needs of his preferred customers" whereas less preferred customers are "forced to wait in a queue" (Williamson, 1991, p. 81 & 83). In other words, suppliers do not treat all their customers equally (Nollet et al., 2012, p. 1187). Using sophisticated customer portfolio analysis, they classify customers according to different variables such as strategic importance, attractiveness, cost to serve and relationship value (Eng, 2004, p. 51).

In this section an introduction to the preferred customer status is given. When companies receive this preferred status, suppliers could offer them a number of benefits. These benefits will therefore be discussed in the next section.

## 2.2 Economic, Support, Innovative and Operational Benefits of the Preferred Customer Status

Achieving a preferred customer status at core suppliers can result in competitive advantages relative to competing buyers by deriving greater benefits from suppliers' resources and capabilities (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1178). Blenkhorn and Banting (1991) stated that there can be savings achieved between five and thirty per cent (Blenkhorn & Banting, 1991, p. 188). Bew (2007) argued the percentages are lower; between two and four per cent savings can be realized of the company's total spend base (Bew, 2007, p. 2).

The benefits offered by suppliers to companies can be classified with figure 1. In this figure a pyramid is shown, which is divided in three layers. The bottom layer represents the regular customers which do not receive any preferences. This layer is accessible for all customers. The middle layer represents the little preferred customers, which receives some preferences, but for a pay. Not all the customers will receive this treatment. The top layer represents the real preferred customers, which get access to several preferences, without paying for it. This layer is only accessible for a selective number of customers.

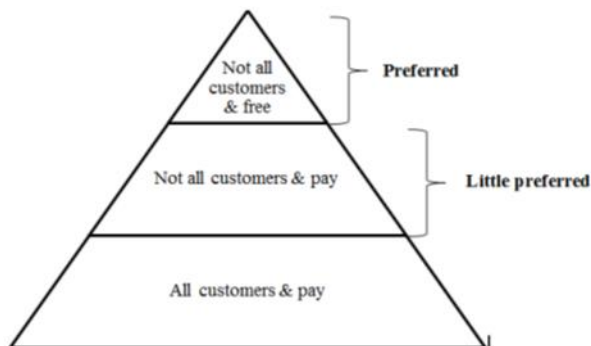


Figure 1: Mapping the benefits of a preferred customer status

As mentioned before, suppliers could offer a number of benefits to their preferred customers. These benefits are received by companies without any cost. Therefore, these benefits belong to the top of the pyramid of figure 1. These benefits can be categorized in four overarching themes: economic, support, innovative and operational benefits.

Firstly, suppliers can offer economic benefits such as unique cost reduction opportunities (e.g. transportation costs and inventory management) to the preferred customers (Bew, 2007, p. 2). When a supplier manages the customer's inventories it will lead to reduced inventories, less working capital is needed by the manufacturer and the cash flow will improve (Ulaga, 2003, p. 689). Next to this, Christiansen & Maltz (2002) found that lead times could be reduced from 16 weeks to 8 weeks while being a preferred customer (Christiansen & Maltz, 2002, p. 188).

Secondly, suppliers give also support benefits to their preferred customers (Nollet et al., 2012, p. 1187). They could for example dedicate their best personnel to joint new product development (Steinle & Schiele, 2008, p. 11). Also giving the appropriate information on time and be available and responsive are seen as support benefits from the suppliers (Nollet et al., 2012, p. 1187).

Thirdly, innovative benefits can be acquired at key suppliers (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1178). One of these benefits is access to new proprietary technologies (Christiansen & Maltz, 2002, p. 188; Ellis, Henke, & Kull, 2012, p. 1260). Next to this, offering

innovations to the buying firm, enter into an exclusive agreement with the buying firm and customizing their products according to the customer's wishes are also innovative benefits suppliers offer to preferred customers (Steinle & Schiele, 2008, p. 11).

Fourthly, suppliers can offer operational benefits like privileged treatment if bottlenecks occur due to constraints in production capacity (Steinle & Schiele, 2008, p. 11). Next to this, suppliers regularly put most-preferred customers at the top of allocation lists for materials or services in short supply (Bew, 2007, p. 2). Also product quality, e.g. delivering consistent quality levels, is an operational benefit a buying firm can acquire (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006, pp. 122-127).

In the next section the cycle of preferred customership will be explained and the antecedents of the preferred customer status will be discussed.

## 2.3 Customer Attractiveness and Supplier Satisfaction as Antecedents of the Preferred Customer Status

### 2.3.1 Explanation of the Cycle of Preferred Customership

According to Schiele et al. (2012), (customer) attractiveness is an important factor for awarding customers with a preferred status. It is in fact one of the three major steps towards the preferred customer status. The other two steps include: 1) supplier satisfaction 2) preferred customer status itself (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1180). These three major steps come together in the cycle of preferred customership which is shown in figure 2.

The first step of the cycle is the step of customer attractiveness. Customer attractiveness is based on the expectations that a supplier has towards the buyer at the moment of initiating or intensifying a business relationship. Suppliers have a portfolio of relationships and compare their satisfaction with one relationship to each other to reflect if the outcome of the exchange is relative to previously established expectations (comparison level). If this is the case, the supplier will award the preferred status to a customer. If not, the customer will be awarded a regular status or the relationship will be discontinued (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1180).

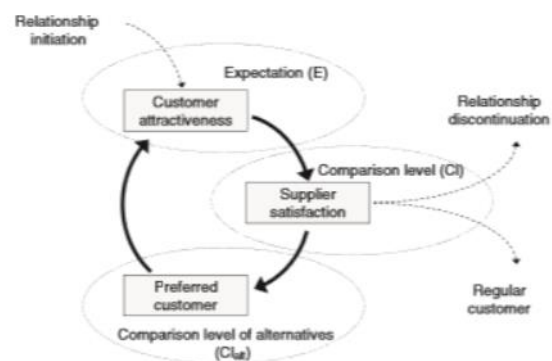


Figure 2: Cycle of preferred customership

### 2.3.2 Customer Attractiveness: Initial Expectations and Several Factors as the First Step towards the Preferred Customer Status

As mentioned above, the first antecedent of the cycle of preferred customership is the step of customer attractiveness. According to Blau (1964), an individual is attracted to another if he expects associating with this other individual to be in some way rewarding for himself (Blau, 1964, p. 20). This finding is supported by Mortensen (2012), which emphasized that

customer attractiveness is an ex-ante construct that is based on expectations to start and to subsequently develop an exchange relationship (Mortensen, 2012, p. 1207 & 1214; Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1180).

The factors which determine customer attractiveness vary among different actors. E.g. Fiocca's framework (1982) is more focused on company related factors and in particular focused on customer's size and potential purchases (Abell & Hammond, 1979, p. 214; Fiocca, 1982, p. 57).

Hüttinger et al. (2012) researched a number of drivers for customer attractiveness. These drivers were collected from several authors and combined in different categories: market growth factors (e.g. size and market share), risk factors (e.g. standardization of product and demand stability), technological factors (e.g. knowledge transfer and types of technological skills), economic factors (e.g. margins and price volume) and social factors (e.g. communication and information exchange) (Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1199).

Next to all these drivers, two other factors are also important regarding customer attractiveness, namely trust and commitment. Both are key terms in the literature on buyer-supplier relations and important process variables of attraction (Ellegaard & Ritter, 2007, p. 5; Ford, 2002, p. 365).

A customer could be attractive in many ways. However, it could be that the supplier is still unsatisfied. In practice this means that attractiveness and satisfaction have to be assessed differently (Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1198). However, even though these are two distinct constructs, they are sequentially linked to each other (Mortensen, 2012, pp. 1214-1215; Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1180). Therefore, supplier satisfaction will be discussed in the next section.

### *2.3.3 Supplier Satisfaction: Meeting the Expectations with Multiple Factors as the Second Step towards the Preferred Customer Status*

The high percentage of quantitative analysis indicates that the research regarding supplier satisfaction is more developed than that of customer attractiveness (Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1200). A number of academics have tried to define the concept of supplier satisfaction. Wilson (1995) stated that the level of satisfaction experienced by the supplier depends on the discrepancies between the supplier's expectations and the value that is actually obtained through an exchange relationship (Wilson, 1995, p. 335). This definition is in line with Schiele et al. (2012), who defined supplier satisfaction as a condition that is achieved if the quality of outcomes from a buyer-supplier relationship meets or exceeds the supplier's expectations (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1181).

These expectations can vary in a number of driving factors. Hüttinger et al. (2012) developed regarding supplier satisfaction a research. In this research different driving factors from multiple authors are combined in a number of categories: technical excellence (e.g. early supplier involvement and supplier development), supply value (e.g. profitability and dedicated investments), mode of interaction (e.g. communication and reaction) and operational excellence (e.g. forecast/planning and payment habits) (Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1201).

According to Benton & Maloni (2005), supplier satisfaction is primarily driven by the nature of the buyer-supplier relationship and not by performance, due to the fact that suppliers are more concerned with the nature of the relationship compared to the performance of this relationship. A relationship-driven strategy is stated clearly as the best choice for those who wish to prosper in the competitive global environment and therefore buying

firms should emphasize a relationship-driven supply chain strategy, rather than a performance based strategy (Benton & Maloni, 2005, p. 17).

It can be concluded that a minimum level of satisfaction may be required to maintain a relationship. However, satisfaction can rise gradually over time in a relationship (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1181). The most essential part is the assessment of outcomes, due to the fact that it helps parties in making decisions regarding upgrading or downgrading their relationships (Wilson & Mummalaneni, 1986, p. 51). This means suppliers can upgrade the relationships to a preferred status with customers whom which they are satisfied with and maintain or downgrade relationships to regular customers with customers whom which provide normal satisfaction (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1181).

## **2.4 Buyer Reputation, Buyer Status and Strategic Fit in Relation to the Preferred Customer Status**

Three concepts will be discussed in the next section: buyer reputation, buyer status and strategic fit. All three will be applied to the concept of preferred customer status.

### *2.4.1 Buyer Reputation: a Collective Assessment of a Firm's Past Actions and Future Prospects Influencing the Preferred Customer Status*

Reputation is defined as a collective assessment of a firm's past actions and future prospects that describe the firm's overall appeal to all its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990, p. 233; Zhao & Smith, 2006, p. 111). As mentioned before, according to Fombrun & Shanley (1990) reputation can lead to several benefits. Next to this, reputation orderings crystallize the statuses of firms within an industrial social system (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990, p. 233). In other words, reputation can determine a status of a firm.

Regarding buyer reputation, Ramsay & Wagner (2009) stated that some customers may possess favorable public or market reputations, which make them appear attractive to suppliers, regardless of the relative profitability of the resulting exchanges. Therefore, the customers could get a preferred treatment over others at these suppliers (Ramsay & Wagner, 2009, p. 131). According to Nollet et al. (2012), customers (buying firms) could add value to their suppliers if they improve their long-term benefits in terms of know-how, reputation, innovation or access to new markets (Nollet et al., 2012, p. 1189). Adding value is one factor that must be addressed by the buyer to increase the level of attractiveness (Ellegaard & Ritter, 2007, p. 5; Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1197) and thus it can lead to a preferred customer status.

### *2.4.2 Buyer Status: Position in a Social Hierarchy Leading to Benefits, Competitive Advantage and Preferred Customer Status*

Status can be seen as the externally assigned measure of a social position (Patterson et al., 2014, p. 73). It is also described as the position in a social hierarchy that results from accumulated acts of deference (Patterson et al., 2014, p. 74). This status may stem from an organization's historical legacy in the form of positive or negative associations that may have little to do with assessments of quality (Patterson et al., 2014, p. 76; Washington & Zajac, 2005, p. 283 & 284).

Most researchers agreed on the fact that status, to some extent, result from differences in social rank and can lead to privileges (Patterson et al., 2014, p. 76). Next to this, different kind of studies treated status as a resource that, if accumulated, can help

an organization obtain its desired outcomes (Patterson et al., 2014, p. 76). E.g. Podolny (1993) indicated that a higher status leads to lower transaction costs in forming syndicate and investor relations (Podolny, 1993, p. 851). Therefore, it could be argued that a higher status leads to benefits. This is in line with Washington & Zajac (2005), who found that high status organizations receive benefits above and beyond what they would receive based upon their performance or quality (Washington & Zajac, 2005, p. 284). Next to this, as mentioned before, research stated that high status organizations are able to gain a competitive advantage in the market (Patterson et al., 2014, p. 75). Status has thus an influence on privileges, benefits and can lead to a competitive advantage. These privileges, benefits and competitive advantages are only accessible for a limited number of firms, namely the ones with a high status. Therefore, it can be concluded that status could have an influence on a preferred customer status.

#### *2.4.3 Strategic fit: Consistency between Customer Priorities and Supply Chain Capabilities as a Possible Driver of the Preferred Customer Status*

Strategic fit means that both the competitive and supply chain strategies have the same goal. It refers to consistency between the customer priorities that the competitive strategy hopes to satisfy and the supply chain capabilities that the supply chain strategy aims to build (Chopra & Meindl, 2007, p. 24). If a mismatch exists between what the supply chain does particularly well and the desired customer needs, the company will either need to restructure the supply chain to support the competitive strategy or alter its strategy to achieve strategic fit (Chopra & Meindl, 2007, p. 26).

Regarding the preferred customer status, it was already indicated that strategic fit is a possible driver for this status. Suppliers appear to emphasize such factors as strategic fit (Bew, 2007, p. 3; Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1201). From the scorecards suppliers use, it shows that beyond price and volume other additional factors have a high weight on these scorecards, including strategic fit. Due to the fact that strategic fit is a factor where supply organizations have an opportunity to influence on (Bew, 2007, p. 3).

### **2.5 Economic Value, Strategic Compatibility, Relational Quality and Instruments of Interaction as Clustered Themes in which Multiple Drivers Influence the Preferred Customer Status**

Preferential buyer status is measured by suppliers' perception of granting a buyer preferential treatment compared to other competitive buyers in the suppliers' customer portfolio (Blonska, Rozemeijer, & Wetzels, 2008, p. 5). In the previous section, reputation, status and strategic fit were already mentioned as possible drivers of a preferred customer status. However, there are multiple drivers discussed among academism's which could lead to a preferred customer status. These drivers can be clustered in four overarching themes.

The first theme is economic value. High purchasing volumes and profitability are drivers of a preferred customer status (Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1202; Moody, 1992, p. 52; Steinle & Schiele, 2008, p. 11). Next to this, removing unnecessary cost-to-serve burdens on suppliers improves end-to-end supply chain economics for all concerned and therefore helps to secure customer of choice status (Bew, 2007, p. 4).

Steinle and Schiele (2008) argued that geographical proximity between the buyer and supplier and cluster membership can be seen as drivers of a preferred customer status. They stated that it

is easier for firms to achieve preferred customer status when there both are located in the same regional or national cluster, instead of a foreign firm attempting to access a remote supplier (Steinle & Schiele, 2008, p. 3). These two drivers belong to the strategic compatibility theme (Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1202).

The last two themes discussed are relational quality (e.g. trust and commitment) and instruments of interaction (e.g. early supplier involvement and supplier development) (Blonska, 2010, p. 40; Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1202; Moody, 1992, p. 52). Investments in supplier development have a direct effect on relational (trust and commitment) and cognitive (shared future) capital. This, in turn, positively influences structural capital (strong bonds), leading to preferential buyer benefits and status (Blonska, 2010, p. 38 & 40).

The findings of Ellis et al. (2012) contradict the driver of high share of sales with a supplier, which should automatically make the buyer a preferred customer. These actors stated that this is not the case. These findings encourages small- and medium-sized firms to strive to achieve preferred customer status and simultaneously alerts large corporations that their size alone may not be sufficient to ensure privileged treatment (Ellis et al., 2012, p. 1265). This is in line with Blonska et al. (2008), which stated that in case buyers are not powerful enough, they can trigger other relational issues (e.g. trust, commitment and economic satisfaction) to build a competitive position in a supplier's portfolio of competitive buyers which will lead to a preferential buyer status (Blonska et al., 2008, p. 12). Therefore, it can be concluded that preferred customer status has different kind of drivers and is achievable for all company sizes.

## **3. METHODS: RESEARCH DESIGN & DATA COLLECTION**

### **3.1 Design of the Two Questionnaires and Validation of the Questions**

The relationship of Company X with its key suppliers was analyzed by two questionnaires. One questionnaire for Company X and one for the three key suppliers. Both questionnaires contained the same elements. However, in some elements the questions differed between the two. The first part of the questionnaires was related to the firm's specifications and served as an introduction. The second part contained questions regarding the classification of the relationship. The third part was used to analyze the benefits regarding the preferred customer status. The fourth part focused on the antecedents of the preferred customer status in the relationship between Company X and its three key suppliers. In the last part questions were asked regarding buyer reputation, buyer status and strategic fit in relation to the preferred customer status.

A part of the questions used were taken from previous bachelor theses, which are validated throughout the years. The other parts, especially regarding the last three concepts mentioned, were developed on my own. All the questions were checked by the supervisor beforehand and also by Company X itself. Next to this, the interview was rehearsed to fix the last errors in the questions. The two questionnaires can be found in appendix 9.2 and 9.3.

### **3.2 Face-To-Face Interviews with the Purchasing Manager of Company X and Three Representatives from the Three Key Suppliers**

In table 1 the overview of interview respondents per case is given. From the buying side, all the interviews were done by one purchase manager (P1). From the supplier side, a general

manager, the director and a key account manager represented the three key suppliers (S1-S3). In the following chapters the referred people will be named with the initials given in the table.

Case	Interviewed Supplier	Interviewed persons
1	Supplier 1	P1;S1
2	Supplier 2	P1;S2
3	Supplier 3	P1;S3

Table 1: Overview of interview respondents per case

The interview was conducted based on the dyadic perspective. This means that both the buyer and the supplier side were interviewed. This is done to get a better picture of the relationship between the companies and to get information from both perspectives of the relationship. All the interviews have been audio-taped. All the interviews took place face-to-face and at site, except the interview with Supplier 3, who was invited to the site of Company X. The interviews were conducted in the Dutch language and all took place in May. To prevent biases, the concepts of buyer reputation, buyer status and strategic fit were explained with a definition before the questions over the different concepts were asked.

## 4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

### 4.1

Left out due to confidential information.

### 4.2 Case 1: Supplier 1: Several Benefits through Company Name, Experience, Dedication and High Status

#### 4.2.1

Left out due to confidential information.

#### 4.2.2 Implementation of Changes, Quick Problem Solving and Short Delivery Times as Benefits of the Relationship

In this section the benefits of the relationship will be discussed. Similar benefits are discussed, but also benefits which are only stated by one company.

First of all, both companies agree on the implementation of changes. Company X expects changes from Supplier 1 and Supplier 1 stated that they will do this, because they like to go along with the customer (P1, S1). Next to this, Supplier 1 will solve a problem of Company X quickly. Company X sees shared development projects not as a benefit, whereas Supplier 1 does (P1, S1). Supplier 1 also prefers these kinds of projects (S1). The benefit which was only mentioned by Supplier 1 is short delivery times. They deliver people quickly according to their manager (S1).

#### 4.2.3 Several Attractiveness and Satisfaction Factors make Company X Attractive and Satisfy Supplier 1

Here the antecedents of the relationship will be described. Similar antecedents, but also differences on attractiveness and satisfaction are found.

The company name is an attractiveness factor where both companies agree on. Company X's name has still a positive influence and appearance (P1). According to Supplier 1, the name of Company X is good, makes them attractive and they use it also as a marketing tool (S1). Regarding size of the company, both parties also agree this influences attractiveness

(P1, S1). Commitment and dedication towards the relationship is also seen as an attractiveness factor. Company X puts effort in itself by improving all the processes, e.g. organization, business and innovation processes, but also puts effort in the relationship which is valued (P1, S1). The last agreement is about loyalty and honesty. Both stated that Company X is a loyal and honest company, which influences the attractiveness of the company (P1, S1). Company X stated also that a good relationship with the management is an attractiveness factor, but Supplier 1 did not argue that this could have an influence (P1, S1).

Both companies are satisfied with the present relationship between Supplier 1 and Company X (P1, S1). There are different reasons for this satisfaction. First of all, communication and forecasting are good according to both parties (P1, S1). Next to this, payment habits, even if they are not always optimal, leads to satisfaction, because Company X will pay at the end and keeps their promises with payments (P1, S1). According to Supplier 1, Company X is also a reliable customer and they have knowledge and experience in their field which leads to satisfaction (S1). According to Company X, satisfaction can also be influenced by the added value of the company (P1). Also getting more in contact with your suppliers could increase satisfaction (P1). Supplier 1 agrees with the fact that getting more in contact with suppliers increases satisfaction. However, Company X could improve this, where the amount of contact with the suppliers is not a lot at the moment (S1). The procurement policy of Company X, e.g. purchasing at sharp prices, does not only makes them less attractive, it also leads to less satisfaction (S1).

#### 4.2.4 Buyer Reputation, Buyer Status and Strategic Fit: Present and Influential on the Preferred Status

Both companies stated that the reputation of Company X is high and good (P1, S1). Both see reputation as a driver to a preferred customer status (P1, S1).

The status of Company X at Supplier 1 is high (P1, S1). According to Supplier 1, Company X has this high status due to the fact that they solve their problems, their company is highly rated and it is a prominent company to work for (S1). Only on the appearance of the company and the fact that people want Company X as a customer both companies agree that it has an influence on status (P1, S1). Both companies also agree that status has an influence on a preferred customer status (P1, S1). You will run faster for a company with high status (S1).

Company X and Supplier 1 fit together (P1, S1). They have the same thoughts and ideas and their relationship has developed over time, which brought both companies closer together (P1, S1). Supplier 1 also thinks they fit due to the fact that both companies are active in a continuous search for new technologies and partnerships (S1). Apart from this, trust has increased over time and history has an influence on the fit (S1). Company X argued that they manage Supplier 1 by looking at the packages they have and if they fit their packages (P1). Overall Supplier 1 and Company X fit together. However, it was argued that Company X establishes the goals in the relationship, but Supplier 1 disagrees and stated that they perform their own goals (P1, S1). Therefore, there is no real fit and cooperation in establishing goals. Strategic fit will lead to a preferred customer status, according to both companies (P1, S1). When the relationship is developed and you got closer to each other, the strategic fit has improved. Therefore, the chance on a preferred customer status will increase (P1, S1).

#### 4.2.5 *Multiple Drivers for Becoming a Preferred Customer at Supplier 1*

Both companies agree that investing time in the relationship and generating turnover at the suppliers influences the preferred customer status (P1, S1). They also agree on the fact that preferred status is primarily a people's job. If you like the other person more, it is much easier to give him or her a preferred status (P1, S1). Making good appointments with your suppliers can also lead to a preferred treatment (P1, S1). According to Company X, trust is also important in relation to a preferred status (P1). Supplier 1 stated also a number of other reasons to give a preferred customer status: 1) When a company has knowledge and experience in their field. 2) When a company is reliable and payment behavior is good. 3) When the customer is offering interesting jobs to the supplier, which can flatter him. 4) A certain degree of turnover is a prerequisite. 5) A long-term contract has definitely an influence on a preferred status (S1).

### 4.3 Case 2: Supplier 2: Being a Preferred Customer through Company Size, Knowledge and Commitment

#### 4.3.1

Left out due to confidential information.

#### 4.3.2 *Benefits: Short Delivery Times, Willingness to Help and Better Prices*

In this section several benefits will be described which are stated by the two interviewees of both companies. Not all the benefits are stated by both, which means that there are different feelings about the benefits received or offered.

The first benefit where both companies agree on, is the short delivery times in terms of people. If Company X needs people quickly, SUPPLIER 2 will deliver them (P1, S2). E.g. Company X urgently needed some people, due to shortage in their own staff. They called SUPPLIER 2 for help and they delivered the people very fast to Company X (P1). This benefit is only accessible for A-customers and therefore only for preferred customers (S2). Company X expects from SUPPLIER 2 implementation of changes, so that Company X can optimize and spend less money (P1). However, SUPPLIER 2 only will change if they see the change as useful. When there is no other option, they will do it, but it is not a guaranteed benefit for Company X that all the changes will be implemented in their way (S2). Next to this, both SUPPLIER 2 and Company X agree that SUPPLIER 2 is willing to help Company X earlier when there are problems, compared to other non-preferred customers (P1, S2). Thus SUPPLIER 2 is running harder for their A-customers, also in terms of problem solving.

There are also two benefits only mentioned by SUPPLIER 2. The first one is about innovations. SUPPLIER 2 is getting their innovations earlier to their A-customers than to lower-class customers. However, this also depends on the type of operations and therefore this benefit is not always accessible, but there is a guaranteed preference, when it is accessible (S2). Next to this, A-customers are customers where a lot of work is done according to SUPPLIER 2 and also a lot of turnover is generated there. Therefore, they have better prices compared to lower-class customers (S2).

#### 4.3.3 *Multiple Attractiveness and Satisfaction Factors make Company X Attractive and Satisfy SUPPLIER 2*

In the following section the antecedents of the relationship will be described. It also applies here that there are different things

stated by the two interviewees regarding attractiveness and satisfaction, next to the similarities.

Regarding attractiveness, the first thing both companies agree on is the fact that the company size has an influence on the attractiveness of Company X (P1, S2). With a bigger company you have more people walking around, which gives you more continuity and flexibility (S2). Also commitment is an attractiveness factor according to both companies (P1, S2). Company X puts effort in the relationship and has the door open for conversations (P1, S2). The name Company X also influences the attractiveness of the company. For SUPPLIER 2 it is a pre to have Company X in their customer portfolio (S2). Company X itself also thinks that their name has still a positive appearance and influence and therefore is attractive (P1). The last point both companies agree on is honesty and loyalty (P1, S2). Company X has the name to be a loyal company and is also honest to SUPPLIER 2, which makes them attractive. This is also needed, otherwise the relationship will not work in the first place (S2). There were two attractiveness factors only stated by the supplier side. The fit of both companies in terms of operations, makes Company X more attractive (S2). Besides this, both companies are located close to each other, this makes them also more attractive (S2). Where both parties disagree on, are the prices. Company X stated that they offer financially good prices, whether SUPPLIER 2 stated that the prices at the moment are too sharp for what they do (P1, S2).

Both parties are satisfied with the current relationship between SUPPLIER 2 and Company X (P1, S2). There are different factors which lead to this satisfaction. First of all, both companies agree that the communication level is good (P1, S2). Next to this, planning and forecasting are also seen as satisfying for both companies (P1, S2). Supplier development is present at SUPPLIER 2 and leads to satisfaction according to both purchasers (P1, S2). In terms of payments habits, the satisfaction can lack due to a fluctuating time-span. However, as mentioned before, Company X will pay always, which leads to satisfaction at the end (P1). SUPPLIER 2 has a different opinion as they see room for improvement here. At the moment their satisfaction regarding payment habits is less than their overall satisfaction level (S2). Two satisfaction factors were only stated by SUPPLIER 2. First of all, trust is seen as a satisfaction factor. The trust is present in the relationship and this is satisfying SUPPLIER 2 (S2). Next to this, the colleagues and the company itself are nice to work with, which increases the satisfaction (S2).

#### 4.3.4 *Buyer Reputation, Buyer Status and Strategic Fit: Present, but not Influential on the Preferred Customer Status*

The reputation of Company X is considered as high (P1, S2). There is a disagreement between the two companies in terms of influence on the preferred customer status. According to SUPPLIER 2, reputation has no influence on the preferred customer status, because they consider other factors important regarding the preferred status (S2). However, Company X thinks that a good reputation will have a positive influence on a preferred customer status and if the reputation of the company drops, the chance on a preferred status will also drop (P1).

Both agree to the fact that the status of Company X is high (P1, S2). Even though status is hard to define, Company X argued that status has a positive influence on the preferred customer status (P1). SUPPLIER 2 disagrees and stated that status has no influence at all on the preferred customer status (S2).

The relationship has been developed over time and both companies got closer to each other (P1, S2). According to

SUPPLIER 2, the fit is there, because they deliver the services Company X needs (S2). Also in terms of thoughts and ideas the companies match with each other (P1, S2). The goals of both companies are at the moment the same. However, the goals are established by Company X and therefore come from one direction. Here is room for improvement to fit even better with each other (P1, S2). Also with strategic fit there is a conflicting opinion about the influence on the preferred customer status. SUPPLIER 2 stated, even though you work easier for a company when you strategically fit, it will have no influence on the preferred customer status (S2). Company X believes that strategic fit can lead to a preferred customer status, because after two-three years you find out you fit each other and then a preferred customer status is something which can happen more often and easier (P1).

#### *4.3.5 Several Drivers which Influence the Chance on a Preferred Customer Status at SUPPLIER 2 Positively*

Only one driver of the preferred customer status is similar according to both companies, namely the investment in the relationship and the development of a good relationship (P1, S2). If this goes according to plan, the preferred customer status is easier achieved. As mentioned before, the purchaser of Company X stated that making good appointments, generating turnover for the suppliers and the fact that it is a people's job will also influence the preferred customer status (P1). The manager of SUPPLIER 2 stated several other drivers of a preferred customer status. The first one is the amount of work given to the supplier. When a customer is offering the full package, it will positively influence the preferred customer status (S2). Next to this, the importance of the company will influence the status (S2). Also long-term contracts have an influence, due to the fact that it gives more security and it works easier (S2). If customers adjust the work to the suppliers, it also has a positive influence on the preferred status (S2).

### **4.4 Case 3: Supplier 3: Obtaining benefits through Good Appointments, Dedication and Strategic Fit**

#### *4.4.1*

Left out due to confidential information.

#### *4.4.2 Contradictions in Benefits and Company X Receives more Benefits than Expected*

The benefits of Company X at Supplier 3 will be described in this section. There are no benefits where both companies agree on. This could be caused by the relationship between the two interviewees.

First of all, also at Supplier 3 it is expected that they will implement changes and innovations (P1). Supplier 3 is doing this, but this is more done based on working together on the changes and innovations than do it on command (S3). Therefore, shared project developments are present as a benefit according to Supplier 3 (S3). This is in contradiction with Company X, which stated that this is not seen as a benefit, because they think shared development is a standard (P1). There is also a contradiction in quick deliveries. Company X argued when they have a problem and need something delivered quickly, Supplier 3 will probably not help them very fast based on changes which happened (P1). However, Supplier 3 stated that Company X is a quick-response customer, which means that they get preferences compared to other customers in terms of quick deliveries. E.g. when Company X asks at 3 o'clock for a delivery the next day, they will get priority for this delivery over other customers (S3). The following benefits were only

mentioned by Supplier 3: 1) Company X gets specific attention from Supplier 3 by putting a team and a key account manager on them. 2) Supplier 3 offers Company X the best price guarantee for their products. 3) Attention is given from the management. This is more a soft benefit, where the CEO or general manager will make time for Company X when they need them. 4) Sometimes Company X has access to new technologies, but this benefit is not always present, due to the fact that it depends which kind of technology it is and if this technology fits Company X (S3).

#### *4.4.3 Company X is Attractive and Satisfies Supplier 3, but Company X has a Different Opinion*

There are also in terms of attractiveness and satisfaction a number of contradictions between the two interviewees. However, there are also similarities found.

The first similarity is regarding the financially good prices. Both stated that the prices have a positive influence on the attractiveness of Company X (P1, S3). Next to this, the commitment and dedication and putting effort in the relationship is seen as attractive by both companies (P1, S3). However, there are also contradictions in the attractiveness. Company X wondered if they are still an important customer for Supplier 3, due to the reduction of people (P1). Supplier 3 stated that Company X is an important customer and therefore they are attractive for them (S3). Next to this, the relationship with the management is worse compared to the past. (P1). However, Supplier 3 stated that the years of cooperation has a positive influence on the attractiveness and that the relationship is good (S3). Supplier 3 stated also a couple of other reasons for the attractiveness of Company X: 1) The turnover generated with Company X. 2) The reputation of Company X at the market. 3) The company philosophy of Company X, which matches the one of Supplier 3. 4) The company name (S3).

Supplier 3 is satisfied with the current relationship, but Company X stated that the relationship with Supplier 3 is less satisfying than the ones with Supplier 1 and SUPPLIER 2 (P1, S3). Where both companies do agree on are the payment habits. Both stated that in general the payment habits are good and this leads to satisfaction (P1, S3). There is a contradiction in communication, where Supplier 3 stated that the communication is good, but Company X argued that the communication is not optimal (P1, S3). Besides the changes, Company X is also less satisfied with Supplier 3, because there is less trust, promises are not always met and Supplier 3 is more focused on themselves than on their customers (P1). Supplier 3 disagrees with this and stated that the satisfaction level is high, also because of the following reasons: 1) Company X is solving problems when they occur. 2) Openness and enthusiasm is present at Company X. 3) Working together at projects and going the same path leads to satisfaction, also in terms of working at innovations. 4) Supplier development is present in the relationship (S3).

#### *4.4.4 Buyer Reputation, Buyer Status and Strategic Fit: All Present and Influential on the Preferred Customer Status*

Both companies agree that the reputation of Company X is high (P1, S3). Both agree that reputation has an influence on the preferred customer status (P1, S3). However, Supplier 3 argued that the specific influence on the preferred status is hard to measure, due to the fact that reputation is a umbrella term (S3).

There is a disagreement regarding the status of Company X at Supplier 3. Company X stated that the status is not that high at Supplier 3, but Supplier 3 argued that the status of Company X is high (P1, S3). A reason for giving Company X a high status



is the appearance of the company (S3). Both agree that status has an influence on the preferred customer status (P1, S3). However, Supplier 3 also argued here that it is an umbrella term and therefore the specific influence is hard to measure (S3).

Both companies stated that they fit together (P1, S3). However, Company X argued that the fit used to be better in the past (P1). Company X also stated that historically seen the companies fit together (P1). Supplier 3 disagrees and argued that history has not much influence on the strategic fit (S3). Where both companies do agree on is the fact that the development of the relationship has an influence on the fit (P1, S3). Regarding the ideas and thoughts there is also a disagreement. Where Company X is still looking if Supplier 3 has the same ideas and thoughts as them, Supplier 3 stated that they have the same ideas and thoughts as Company X (P1, S3). This is the same regarding the offered package of Supplier 3 to Company X (P1, S3). Another disagreement is in the statement of goals. Company X argued, as mentioned before, that they state the goals in the relationship. However, Supplier 3 stated that the goals are the same, but determined by the market principle (P1, S3). Both companies agree that strategic fit has an influence on the preferred customer status (P1, S3). When there are multiple overlaps, you grow as a company towards each other and this can lead in the end to a preferred status (S3).

#### *4.4.5 Multiple Drivers Lead to a Preferred Customer Status at Supplier 3*

Regarding the preferred customer status, Supplier 3 agrees with the mentioned reasons of Company X. So making good appointments can lead to a preferred status (P1, S3). Investing a lot of time in the relationship and developing this relationship has also an influence. Moreover, the preferred status is seen as a people's job which is about granting each other projects and opportunities (P1, S3). Supplier 3 stated, next to the mentioned reasons in the case, also a couple of other reasons of the preferred customer status: 1) The fact that Company X is trying to generate turnover at their suppliers. 2) The generated turnover itself. 3) The importance of cooperation with each other. 4) The brand awareness of Company X. 5) The innovativeness of Company X. 7) Long-term contracts.

### **4.5 Quick Problem Solving, Shorter Lead Times and Better Prices as Main Benefits for Company X**

Company X retrieves several benefits from their key suppliers. In this section the three main benefits will be described which Company X retrieves without any cost. Therefore, these benefits belong to the top of the pyramid of figure 1.

The key benefit which is present at all three suppliers is the quick-response for problem solving. Supplier 1 and SUPPLIER 2 will run harder when Company X has a problem and they will try to solve the problem quickly. Also Supplier 3 will run faster, as they categorized Company X as a quick-response customer.

The second main benefit is short lead times. At SUPPLIER 2 and Supplier 1 the lead times in people is shorter compared to other competitive companies. E.g. Company X urgently needed some people, due to shortage in their own staff. They called SUPPLIER 2 for help and they delivered the people very fast to Company X.

The last main benefit what Company X retrieves from two suppliers without any cost are better prices.

## **5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Several Benefits Discovered which Confirmed Existing Factors in the Available Literature**

In this section the benefits mentioned by the three key suppliers and the buying company are stated and related to the available literature. All three suppliers give some benefits to Company X. The benefit which was mentioned by all three suppliers was, as stated before, the quick response on problem solving and is therefore seen as the key benefit (S1-S3). This benefit is in line with the literature, which stated this as privileged treatment when bottlenecks occur (Steinle & Schiele, 2008, p. 11). Next to this, as mentioned before, short delivery times were present as a benefit in multiple relationships (S1, S2). This benefit is also stated in the literature as reduction of lead times/short delivery times (Christiansen & Maltz, 2002, p. 188). As mentioned before, at two suppliers Company X receives better prices as a benefit compared to lower-class customers (S2, S3). Lower prices is a benefit which is also stated in the available literature (Nollet et al., 2012, p. 1186 & 1187). The following benefit which is present at multiple suppliers are the shared project developments (S1, S3). Both suppliers stated that Company X retrieves this benefit. This benefit is also in line with the literature, which stated that joint development is a benefit of the preferred customer status (Steinle & Schiele, 2008, p. 11). At two suppliers Company X has early access to new technologies or innovations (S2, S3). This benefit which Company X has over their competitors is stated in the literature as access to new proprietary technologies (Ellis et al., 2012, p. 1260). Another benefit which is argued by two suppliers is the implementation of changes (S1, S3). This benefit is in the literature seen as the customization of products to the customer's wishes (Steinle & Schiele, 2008, p. 11), due to that Company X has the benefit of proposing changes which will be performed by the suppliers. The last benefit mentioned by one supplier is the specific attention given to Company X (S3). There is a team and a specific manager available for Company X at this supplier. This benefit is also stated in the literature, namely as support, which means that the supplier is available and responsive to the customer (Nollet et al., 2012, p. 1187).

All the mentioned benefits combined with the available literature can be found in the table in appendix 9.1.1.

### **5.2 Multiple Antecedents Factors Discovered which Confirmed Existing Factors and Added New Factors to the Available Literature**

#### *5.2.1 Customer Attractiveness: Company Name and Procurement Policy as New Factors Added to the Literature and Several Existing Factors Confirmed*

In this section the factors of customer attractiveness will be discussed and combined with the literature. There are a number of different factors related to Company X. The attractiveness factor where all three suppliers agree on is the name of Company X. This name has still a positive appearance and multiple suppliers use it as a marketing tool (S1-S3). This factor has not been stated in the literature yet. Commitment and dedication of the company towards the relationship and putting effort in the relationship is also seen as an attractiveness factor by all three suppliers (S1-S3). Commitment is also stated by the literature as an attractiveness factor (Ellegaard & Ritter, 2007,

p. 5). These three factors are the key factors of attractiveness for Company X.

Loyalty and honesty are both argued by multiple suppliers to be attractiveness factors for Company X as well (S1, S2). When there is no loyalty or honesty, the relationship would not work in the first place according to the suppliers. Both factors are seen as output factors according to the literature, which influence the attractiveness of a company (Hald, Cordon, & Vollmann, 2009, p. 965; Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1199). There is also a factor which leads to disagreement among the suppliers, namely purchasing prices. Two suppliers stated that this price has a negative impact on the attractiveness of Company X (S1, S2), where another supplier stated that Company X has financially good prices (S3). All the suppliers do agree that the price influences at the end the attractiveness. This is in line with the literature which stated that price is an influential factor (Hald et al., 2009, p. 964). The size of the company also influences the attractiveness of a company in a positive way according to multiple suppliers. A bigger company gives you more continuity and flexibility (S1, S2). The literature argued that the size of a company has indeed an influence on attractiveness (Fiocca, 1982, p. 57), but this influence is not that high as many big companies think (Ellis et al., 2012, p. 1265). Therefore, being a big company alone is not enough to be attractive and become a preferred customer. Multiple other factors, as indicated in this paper, are needed for being attractive and becoming a preferred customer.

One supplier (S1) indicated a factor which makes Company X less attractive, namely the procurement policy of Company X, e.g. purchasing at sharp prices. This factor has not been stated by the literature yet.

Multiple other attractiveness factors are stated by the suppliers. These factors and the previous mentioned factors, combined with the available literature, can be found in the table in appendix 9.1.2.

### *5.2.2 Supplier Satisfaction: Added Value as New Factor Added to the Literature and Multiple Existing Factors Confirmed*

Here the factors of supplier satisfaction will be described. Despite the differences in factors, the good communication level was stated by all three suppliers as a factor which leads to satisfaction (S1-S3). The literature stated that communication is indeed a factor which influences satisfaction (Maunu, 2003, p. 75 & 97). Next to this, all three suppliers stated that the payment habits of Company X are in general satisfying (S1-S3), but there is room for improvement according to one supplier (S2). Company X agrees that the payment habits are not always optimal, but Company X will pay always, which leads to satisfaction at the end (P1). All suppliers and Company X agree that payment habits influences the satisfaction level. Payment habits are also stated in the literature as an influential factor for satisfaction (Essig & Amann, 2009, p. 105). These two factors are stated by all the suppliers and therefore are the key satisfaction factors for Company X.

There are also other factors stated by multiple suppliers regarding satisfaction, such as planning and forecasting. Company X is doing a good job in planning and forecasting, which satisfies multiple suppliers (S1, S2). The literature agrees that planning and forecasting have an influence on the satisfaction level of suppliers (Maunu, 2003, pp. 97-98). Next to this, Company X is doing supplier development at multiple suppliers (S2, S3). The presence of supplier development satisfies these suppliers. According to the literature, this factor indeed leads to satisfaction (Paul, Semeijn, & Ernstson, 2010, p.

24). Several other factors such as reliability, knowledge, experience and trust are stated by suppliers as a satisfaction factor (S1, S2). Reliability is indeed a factor which is stated by the literature as a satisfaction factor (Hüttinger, Schiele, & Schröder, 2014, p. 708). Knowledge, experience and trust have also been stated by the literature as respectively business competence and trust (reaction) (Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1201; Maunu, 2003, p. 75 & 96). One factor was only stated by Company X, namely added value. It was argued that a company needs to add value to your business. If this is not the case, you will be less satisfied with them (P1). This factor has not been stated by the literature yet.

Other satisfaction factors which were stated by the suppliers and the buying firm, together with the previous mentioned ones, are combined with the literature in the table which can be found in appendix 9.1.3.

## **5.3 Buyer Reputation, Buyer Status and Strategic Fit: New Factors Added, Existing Factors Confirmed and to Some Extent Influential on the Preferred Customer Status**

In this section the three new concepts will be discussed and combined with the available literature. All three concepts have some factors which lead to a low or high rating on that concept. Next to this, the influence of the three concepts on the preferred customer status will be discussed.

Regarding buyer reputation, all three suppliers stated that the reputation of Company X is high (S1-S3). Company X and two suppliers argued that reputation is a driver of a preferred customer status. If your reputation increases, the chances on a preferred treatment also increases (S1, S3, P1). Another supplier stated that they see reputation not as a driver of a preferred customer status (S2).

Concerning the status of Company X, all three suppliers indicated that this status is high (S1-S3). Several factors form the basis for this high status. Multiple suppliers and Company X stated that the appearance of the company influences the status (S1, S3, P1). This factor is stated in the literature as positive and negative associations (Patterson et al., 2014, p. 76). Next to this, history has an influence on the status of Company X according to multiple suppliers and Company X itself (S2, S3, P1). This is in line with the literature, which argued that history legacy has an influence on status (Patterson et al., 2014, p. 76). Another reason mentioned by one supplier which influences status is the fact that the people want Company X as a customer (S1). Popularity of a company has not been mentioned in the literature yet as a factor which influences status. According to multiple suppliers and Company X status has an influence on the preferred customer status (S1, S3, P1). Whereas a supplier you will run faster for a company with high status (S1). However, one supplier disagrees and sees status not as an influential factor, because they see other factors as influential factors of a preferred status (S2). As mentioned before, the concepts of buyer reputation and buyer status were explained with a definition before the questions were asked about these concepts. However, these concepts still remained a so-called umbrella term, which means the two concepts consist of many elements. This was also indicated by one supplier (S3). Therefore, the influence of the two concepts on the preferred customer status is established, but the specific influence is hard to measure.

About the strategic fit with Company X all the three suppliers and Company X itself are unanimously, because all stated that the companies fit together (S1-S3, P1). This fit is there, due to the fact that all the suppliers and Company X have the same

thoughts and ideas (S1-S3, P1). In the literature this is described as having the same overall goals (Chopra & Meindl, 2007, p. 24). The fact that the relationship has developed over time has also an impact on the strategic fit according to all the suppliers and Company X (S1-S3, P1). This factor has not been mentioned by the literature yet. Next to this, two suppliers stated the fit is there, because the companies historically fit together (S1, S2). In the literature this has also not been mentioned as a factor yet. It is also argued that due to both companies are active in a continuous search for new technologies and partnerships, the fit is better (S1, S3). This can be related to the literature as having the same functional goals and therefore it has an influence on the fit (Chopra & Meindl, 2007, p. 24 & 25). Another factor which is stated by two suppliers is the offered package of the suppliers to Company X (S2, S3). In the literature this is stated as providing capabilities to support strategic fit and thus influences this factor the fit between companies (Chopra & Meindl, 2007, p. 25). Trust is also a factor argued by the suppliers (S1, S3). Trust is not a factor which is discussed in the literature. The last factor, establishing goals, differ per supplier. At one supplier the goals are established on their own (S1), at another supplier the goals are established by Company X (S2) and at the third supplier the goals are determined by the market principle (S3). Again, this factor can be related to (not) having the same overall goals (Chopra & Meindl, 2007, p. 24). Multiple suppliers and Company X argued that strategic fit will lead to a preferred customer status, because the relationship is developed and you got closer to each other. Therefore, the chances on a preferred status will increase (S1, S3, P1). However, one supplier disagrees, as mentioned before, they see other factors as important for giving a preferred status (S2).

Strategic fit is most of the time related to the goals of both companies. Therefore, it is not characterized as an umbrella term and the specific influence on the preferred customer status is easier to measure.

All the factors described and related to the literature can be found in the table in appendix 9.1.4.

#### **5.4 Several Drivers of the Preferred Status Discovered which Confirmed Existing Factors and Added New Factors to the Available Literature**

In this section the influential factors on a preferred customer status argued by the suppliers and Company X will be described. Investing time in the relationship and developing it is seen as a prominent driver of a preferred customer status (S1-S3, P1). In the literature this is stated as strong bonds and is a driver of the preferred status (Blonska, 2010, p. 103; Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1202 & 1203). According to all the suppliers, long-term contracts have a definitely influence on the preferred status (S1-S3). Long-term contracts are also stated in the literature as a driver of a preferred customer status (Hüttinger et al., 2012, p. 1200; Williamson, 1991, p. 81). These two factors are mentioned by all the suppliers and therefore seen as the key factors of a preferred customer status for Company X.

There are also a lot of other factors mentioned and important to the preferred status, such as the generated turnover at the suppliers by Company X (S1, S3, P1). This can be categorized as profitability, which is a driver of a preferred customer status according to the literature (Moody, 1992, p. 52). Getting a preferred status is argued to be a people's job and making good appointments in the relationship also influences the preferred status (S1, S3, P1). Both reasons are not mentioned in the literature yet. However, these two reasons are very important

according to the suppliers and Company X. Next to this, two suppliers indicated that knowledge and experience of a company in their field is a driver of the preferred status (S1, S3). Also this factor has not been described in the literature. Moreover, the importance of the company to the supplier has also not been mentioned as a driver in the literature, but multiple suppliers argued that this influences their decision in giving a preferred status or not (S2, S3).

Several other factors are argued by the suppliers and the buying firm as influential factors on a preferred customer status. These factors combined with the literature can be found in the table in appendix 9.1.5. Here are also the previous mentioned factors stated and put together with the literature.

## **6. CONCLUSION ON THE FINDINGS**

### **6.1 Answering the Four Research Questions: Existing Factors Confirmed, New Factors Added and the Three New Concepts are to Some Extent Influential on the Preferred Customer Status**

With the multiple case study all the four research questions have been answered. Regarding the first question, different kind of benefits, antecedents and drivers have been discovered at Company X. These benefits, antecedents and drivers confirmed a number of factors of the existing literature, but also added new factors to it. This answers the second research question. All these factors can be found in the tables of appendix 9.1.

Three new concepts, namely buyer reputation, buyer status and strategic fit have been studied in a qualitative way. The ranking of these concepts at Company X have been examined. From this it can be concluded that the buyer reputation and buyer status of Company X is high and that there is a strategic fit between Company X and its key suppliers. The reasons behind this ranking were also examined and can be found in the table in appendix 9.1.4. The last research question is about the fact if these three new concepts have an influence on the preferred customer status. From the case study it can be concluded that all three concepts have an influence, because multiple suppliers and the buying side argued that this influence is present. Therefore, it can be concluded that the majority sees these three concepts as influential factors of a preferred customer status. However, as mentioned before, the specific influence of buyer reputation and status on a preferred customer status is hard to measure, due to the fact that both concepts consist of many elements.

### **6.2 The Multiple Case Study Resulted in Several Research Contributions**

A number of research contributions have been done with this multiple case study. First of all, this topic has not been examined by many academics in a qualitative way. With this case study the qualitative view of the topic, combined with the literature, is researched. Next to this, a number of factors are confirmed or added to the literature. Regarding the benefits, only factors are confirmed, such as short delivery times and lower prices. With customer attractiveness, new factors have been discovered, e.g. company name. Here are also factors confirmed like knowledge transfer and commitment. With supplier satisfaction a lot of factors are confirmed, e.g. communication and payment habits. New factors like added value are also discovered. As mentioned before, three new concepts are examined in relation to the preferred status, which is also a research contribution. Regarding these concepts, new factors of it are discovered such as strong brand name

(reputation) and historical fit (strategic fit). Here are also factors confirmed like historical legacy (status) and close relationship (strategic fit). Concerning the drivers of preferred status, a number of new drivers have been discovered, e.g. knowledge and experience, making good appointments and it is seen as a people's job. There are also factors confirmed such as shared future and strong bonds. Once again, all these factors can be found in the tables of appendix 9.1.

### 6.3 Multiple Recommendations to Company X and Future Research is needed

Through the case study it was discovered that Company X obtained several benefits with their key suppliers and is seen as an attractive customer. Therefore, they are awarded with the preferred status. There are a number of recommendations to keep this preferred status at the desired level. First of all, Company X should invest in long-term contracts where possible, because all the suppliers stated that this positively influences the preferred status. Next to this, Company X should use their company name and their knowledge and experience as a strategic or marketing tool, due to the fact that these factors have a lot of influence on their suppliers. Company X should also take a look at their procurement policy. It was stated that they purchase sometimes at cheap prices, which makes them less attractive and the cheap prices could also influence the reliability of the processes. Furthermore, Company X should contact their suppliers more often. At the moment the amount of contact with the suppliers is not a lot and increasing this amount of contact will influence the satisfaction level among the suppliers in a positive way. Besides this, Company X should keep their dedication to relationships, this is appreciated by the suppliers. This means also dedication towards the relationship of Supplier 3, which is at the moment deficient in terms of communication, trust and expectations. Company X should also offer interesting jobs to suppliers to acquire a preferred status, or to keep the one they have at the moment. The last point is the fact that Company X needs to remind that they are attractive, satisfy their suppliers, their reputation and status is high and with these factors retrieve a number of benefits which are only accessible for them. Therefore, they should keep doing what they are doing and improve themselves with the factors mentioned above.

This multiple case study has only been conducted with one buying company and three of its key suppliers. Therefore, the findings and conclusions regarding the examined topic cannot be generalized. The sample size is therefore too small. This case study could strengthen the factors which are already indicated by the available literature. However, new findings are not generally valid and need to be used for hypotheses or other literature studies in the future. The findings and indications, together with the new examined concepts, should therefore be researched more empirically in the near future.

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## 9. APPENDIX

### 9.1 Tables Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

#### 9.1.1 Table Benefits

Benefits retrieved from case study	Related benefits described in literature
All three suppliers act quickly on problem solving at Company X (S1-S3)	Privileged treatment when bottlenecks occur
Company X retrieves short delivery times at multiple suppliers (S1, S2)	Short delivery times/reduction of lead times
Company X gets lower-prices compared to other customers (S2, S3)	Lower prices
Two suppliers have shared project development with Company X (S1, S3)	Shared development projects/ joint development
Company X has earlier access to new technologies or innovations, compared to non-preferred customers (S2, S3)	Access to new proprietary technologies
Implementation of changes asked by Company X (S1, S3)	Customize products according to the customer's wishes
One supplier gives specific attention to Company X as	Support (be available and responsive)

a customer (S3)	
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### 9.1.2 Table Antecedents (Customer attractiveness)

Attractiveness factors retrieved from case study	Related attractiveness factors described in literature
The name of Company X is stated as an attractiveness factor for the company (S1-S3)	-
Commitment and dedication of Company X towards the relationship is stated as attractive (S1-S3)	Commitment
Company X is seen as a loyal company towards their suppliers (S1, S2)	Loyalty (output factor)
Honesty is high at Company X, which influences the attractiveness (S1, S2)	Honesty (output factor)
Purchasing price influences the attractiveness in a positive or negative way (S1-S3)	Price
The size of Company X has a positive influence on their attractiveness (S1, S2)	Company size
The procurement policy of Company X, e.g. purchasing at sharp prices, makes them less attractive (S1)	-
The fit between two companies in terms of operations and company philosophy is seen as attractive (S2, S3)	Compatibility
Relationship with the management has an influence on the attractiveness of the company (S3, P1)	Tight personal relations
Company X is seen as an important customer and is therefore attractive (S3)	-
The turnover generated with Company X has an influence on the attractiveness (S3)	Margins (economic factor)
The reputation of Company X makes them more attractive (S3)	Reputation (leveraging factor)

### 9.1.3 Table Antecedents (Supplier Satisfaction)

Satisfaction factors retrieved from case study	Related satisfaction factors described in literature
The communication level between the companies leads to satisfaction among all the suppliers (S1-S3)	Communication
Payment habits are in general good, which leads to satisfaction among all the suppliers (S1-S3)	Payment habits
Company X is doing a good job in planning and forecasting, which satisfies multiple suppliers (S1, S2)	Forecasting/planning
Supplier development is present at two suppliers, which leads to satisfaction (S2, S3)	Supplier development
Company X is seen as a reliable customer (S1)	Reliability
Company X has knowledge and experience in their field, which leads to satisfaction (S1)	Business competence
Trust is a satisfaction factor according to one supplier and present in the relationship (S2)	Trust (reaction)
Added value is a factor stated by Company X itself. When a company does not add value to you, you will be less satisfied with him (P1)	-
Getting more in contact and do a lot of networking with suppliers will increase the satisfaction (S1, P1)	Supplier involvement
The company is nice to work with, which satisfied us as a supplier (S2)	-

Company X is solving their problems and therefore we are satisfied with them (S3)	Business competence
The openness and enthusiasm of Company X leads to satisfaction (S3)	Openness (reaction)
Working together at the projects and going the same path, also in terms of innovations, satisfies us (S3)	Cooperative relationships

#### 9.1.4 Table Buyer Reputation, Buyer Status & Strategic Fit

<b>Buyer reputation factors retrieved from case study</b>	<b>Related buyer reputation factors described in literature</b>
Left out due to confidential information	-
<b>Buyer status factors retrieved from case study</b>	<b>Related buyer status factors described in literature</b>
The appearance of the company influences the status (S1, S3)	Positive and negative associations
History has an influence on the status of Company X (S2, S3)	Historical legacy
As a supplier we want a prominent and popular company such as Company X (S1)	-
<b>Strategic fit factors retrieved from case study</b>	<b>Related strategic fit factors described in literature</b>
The fit is there, due to the fact that all the suppliers and Company X have the same thoughts and ideas (S1-S3, P1)	Same overall goals
The relationship has developed over time, which brought companies closer together (S1-S3, P1)	-
Historically seen the companies fit together (S1, S2)	-
Both companies are active companies, searching for new technologies and partnerships, and therefore fit together (S1, S3)	Same functional goals (innovations)
The services or packages Company X needs are offered by multiple suppliers (S2, S3)	Provide capabilities to support strategic fit
Trust has increased over time and therefore the fit is better (S1)	-
Establishing goals is done differently at all the suppliers (S1-S3)	(Not) having the same overall goals

#### 9.1.5 Table Drivers Preferred Customer Status

<b>Drivers preferred customer status retrieved from case study</b>	<b>Related drivers preferred customer status described in literature</b>
Investing time in the relationship and developing the relationship is seen as a key driver (S1-S3, P1)	Strong bonds
A long-term contract has definitely an influence on the preferred status (S1-S3)	Long-term contracts
Generated turnover at the suppliers by Company X is an important driver of the preferred status (S1, S3, P1)	Profitability
Acquiring a preferred status is seen as a people's job; if you like the person on the other side, it is easier to obtain the status (S1, S3, P1)	-
Making good appointments influences the chances on a preferred status (S1, S3, P1)	-
Knowledge and experience in your field is a driver of preferred status according to multiple suppliers (S1, S3)	-
The importance of a company to a supplier is a driver	-

of the preferred status (S2, S3)	
A certain degree of turnover is a prerequisite of a preferred status (S2, S3)	Profitability
Reliability (including payment behavior) is an important aspect of a preferred status (S1)	Fairness
Offering interesting jobs to the suppliers affects the preferred status (S1)	Business opportunities
The amount of work given to the supplier also influences the decision in giving a preferred status (S2)	Purchase volumes
Companies which adjust their work to the suppliers influences the chances on a preferred status positively (S2)	Strategic fit
The brand awareness of Company X influences their chances on a preferred status positively (S3)	-
Company X is an innovative company. This has an influence on the preferred status of them (S3)	Quality initiatives
The fact that as a supplier you are recognized as important, e.g. preferred wender, influences the preferred status (S3)	Respect
Trust influences the chances on a preferred status (P1)	Trust

## 9.2 Interview Questions Company X

### *Intro*

1. Hoeveel werknemers heeft uw bedrijf?
2. Wat doet uw bedrijf? Wat zijn de dagelijkse bezigheden van uw bedrijf? (Productie/dienstverlenend?)
3. Wanneer is uw bedrijf opgericht?

### *Classificatie*

4. Deelt u uw relatie met uw leveranciers in bepaalde categorieën?  
→ Indien ja, hoe? (Bijvoorbeeld top leveranciers categorie A, middelmatig categorie B etc.)
5. Hebt u het gevoel dat de leveranciers dit ook bij u als inkoopbedrijf doen?
6. Wordt er binnen het management inzet geleverd om een voorkeursbehandeling te verkrijgen bij belangrijke leveranciers?  
→ Indien ja, hoe uit dit zich?  
→ Indien nee, hoe kan volgens u inzet van management helpen om een voorkeursbehandeling te verkrijgen?
7. Welk cijfer geeft u de relatie met uw leveranciers? Dus in hoeverre bent u tevreden met leverancier A, B en C als klant?

### *Voordelen*

8. Ziet u voordelen bij belangrijke leveranciers zoals kortere levertijden, invloed op de inkoopprijs, beter toegang tot nieuwe technologieën en samenwerkende ontwikkelingsprojecten?
9. Zijn er andere voordelen die u als inkoopbedrijf waarneemt door de voorkeursbehandeling? (Eventuele voorbeelden: exclusieve overeenkomsten, voorkeur wanneer er problemen optreden en betere product kwaliteit)

### *Antecedenten (uitleggen wat antecedenten zijn)*

10. Wat hebt u in het verleden gedaan om een voorkeursbehandeling te verkrijgen bij belangrijke leveranciers? Zijn er acties die u niet ondernomen heeft, maar waarvan u wel denkt dat dit had kunnen helpen om een voorkeursbehandeling te verkrijgen?
11. Ziet u Company X als een aantrekkelijke klant voor uw leveranciers? Wat zijn de factoren (volgens u) die deze aantrekkelijkheid beïnvloeden?
12. Is Company X in staat om belangrijke leveranciers tevreden te stellen met de onderlinge (ruil) relatie?  
→ Welke factoren leiden tot deze tevredenheid in deze relatie?



→ En welke factoren leiden tot ontevredenheid?

13. Zijn er momenteel maatregelen/methodes gepland om ook bij andere leveranciers een voorkeursbehandeling te verkrijgen?

→ Indien ja, welke methodes/maatregelen?

→ Indien nee, waarom niet?

14. Wat is het verleden tussen Company X en leverancier A? Hoe is de relatie tot stand gekomen en heeft deze totstandkoming nog steeds invloed op de huidige relatie en voorkeursbehandeling?

*Reputatie (definitie geven)*

15. Hoe ziet u de reputatie van het bedrijf? Hoe is die ontwikkeld de laatste jaren?

16. Zou reputatie volgens u invloed kunnen hebben op een voorkeursbehandeling bij uw leveranciers

*Status (definitie geven)*

17. Hoe is de status van u ten opzichte van uw leveranciers? Hoe zou u het omschrijven?

(Goed/Middelmatig/slecht)?

18. Hoe is uw status ten opzichte van andere concurrerende bedrijven? Hoe zou u het omschrijven?

19. Zou de status van u als bedrijf invloed kunnen hebben op een voorkeursbehandeling bij u leveranciers?

*Strategische fit (bij elkaar past of niet)*

20. Vindt u dat u inkoopbedrijf aansluit bij u leveranciers? En waarom?

→ Wellicht bij de ene leverancier wel, de andere niet, dan ook: waarom?

21. Hebt u als inkoopbedrijf dezelfde doelen als de leveranciers?

22. Denkt u dat een strategische 'fit' (Als u beter bij elkaar past) leidt tot een voorkeursbehandeling bij uw leveranciers?

### **9.3 Interview Questions Three Key Suppliers**

*Intro*

1. Hoeveel werknemers heeft uw bedrijf?

2. Wat doet uw bedrijf? Wat zijn de dagelijkse bezigheden van uw bedrijf? (Productie/dienstverlenend?)

3. Wanneer is uw bedrijf opgericht?

*Classificatie*

4. Geeft u verschillende categorieën aan uw klanten? Indien ja, welke soort categorieën (Bijv. top klanten zitten in categorie A, middelmatige klanten in categorie B etc.)

→ Welke categorie zit Company X?

5. Hebt u het gevoel dat de klanten dit ook bij u als leverancier doen?

→ Indien Company X aan categorieën zou doen (niet zeker) Hoe staat u erop als leverancier bij Company X? Welke categorie denkt u dat u zit?

6. Geeft u een voorkeursbehandeling aan een klant als het bedrijf als geheel, of aan verschillende afdelingen/instellingen? Of verschilt dit per type bedrijf?

7. Geeft u een voorkeursbehandeling aan Company X?

→ Indien ja, (gelet op antwoord vraag 6) aan het gehele bedrijf of aan bepaalde afdelingen/instellingen?

*Voordelen*

8. Hoe beïnvloeden de in vraag 4 genoemde categorieën (categorie A, B, C) uw gedrag naar klanten?

→ Indien geen categorieën: vertoont u verschillend gedrag naar bepaalde klanten of trekt u ze allemaal gelijk?

9. Wat voor voordelen geeft u klanten die een voorkeursbehandeling krijgen? (Denk hierbij aan kortere levertijden, toegang tot nieuwe technologieën, veranderingen die doorgevoerd moeten worden van klanten, exclusieve overeenkomsten, betere prijzen, samenwerkings-ontwikkelingsprojecten, invloed op de inkoopprijs en product kwaliteit)

*Antecedenten (uitleggen wat antecedenten zijn)*

10. Ziet u Company X als een aantrekkelijke klant?

→ Welke factoren maken Company X aantrekkelijk?

→ Welke factoren maken Company X minder aantrekkelijk?

→ Zijn er factoren die nog niet genoemd zijn, wat Company X (minder) aantrekkelijk maakt?

11. Bent u tevreden met de huidige relatie met Company X?

→ Welke factoren leidden tot tevredenheid betreffende Company X?

→ Welke factoren leidden tot ontevredenheid betreffende Company X?

→ Zijn er nog andere factoren die niet genoemd zijn die leiden tot (on)tevredenheid?

12. Welke cijfer zou u de relatie met Company X geven? (Op een schaal van 1-10; 1 slecht, 6 krappe voldoende en 10 uitstekend)

13. Wat zijn de motiverende redenen van uw bedrijf om Company X een voorkeursbehandeling te geven?

→ Wat heeft Company X gedaan om deze voorkeursbehandeling te bereiken?

→ Wat kan Company X doen om deze voorkeursbehandeling verder te verbeteren?

(Indien de voorkeursbehandeling nog niet bereikt heeft: Wat kan Company X doen om in de categorie van voorkeursbehandeling te komen?)

14. Wat is het verleden tussen u en Company X? Hoe is de relatie tot stand gekomen en heeft deze totstandkoming nog steeds invloed op de huidige relatie en voorkeursbehandeling?

15. Wat zijn maatregelen die klanten (in het algemeen) moeten ondernemen om een voorkeursbehandeling te verkrijgen? Wat is het gewenste gedrag wat ze moeten laten zien?

16. Wat doen klanten in het algemeen om een voorkeursbehandeling te verkrijgen bij u? Verschilt dit van wat u graag zou willen zien wat ze zouden moeten doen om het te verkrijgen?

*Reputatie (definitie geven)*

17. Wat is de reputatie van Company X volgens u?

18. Heeft de reputatie van Company X volgens u invloed op een evt. voorkeursbehandeling?

19. Kan de reputatie van een bedrijf in het algemeen invloed hebben op een evt. voorkeursbehandeling?

*Status (definitie geven)*

20. Wat is de status van Company X volgens u? Hoe zou u dat omschrijven? Wat zijn de redenen voor deze statusaanduiding?

21. Heeft deze status invloed op een eventuele voorkeursbehandeling?

22. Kan een status van een bedrijf in het algemeen invloed hebben op een evt. voorkeursbehandeling?

*Strategische fit (bij elkaar past of niet)*

23. Vindt u dat u bedrijf bij Company X aansluit/past? En waarom?

24. Hebt u als leverancier dezelfde doelen als Company X?

25. Heeft het invloed omdat Company X wel/niet strategisch bij u past, dat ze een voorkeursbehandeling bij u krijgen?

26. Zou u bij een strategische 'fit' (Als u beter bij elkaar past) eerder geneigd zijn een bedrijf in het algemeen een voorkeursbehandeling te geven?