
Bridging the Gap: Unraveling Knowledge Dynamics in Growth Hacking

Luca Simone Macca*

Department of Management
University of Turin
Corso Unione Sovietica 218bis - 10134, Turin, Italy

Mark Anthony Camilleri

University of Malta
Department of Corporate Communication
MSD 2080, Malta

Ciro Troise

Department of Management
University of Turin
Corso Unione Sovietica 218bis - 10134, Turin, Italy

Guido Giovando

Department of Management
University of Turin
Corso Unione Sovietica 218bis - 10134, Turin, Italy

Stefano Bresciani

Department of Management
University of Turin
Corso Unione Sovietica 218bis - 10134, Turin, Italy

** Corresponding author*

Abstract

In the contemporary business landscape, Growth Hacking (GH) has emerged as a pivotal strategy for companies aiming at rapid expansion and sustained success. GH integrates innovative approaches, including big data analytics, rapid experimentation, and continuous learning, to reshape traditional paradigms of company development. Its essence lies in data-driven decision-making, iterative innovation, and rapid prototype design to meet customer needs throughout the entire customer journey. While existing literature has explored the overarching principles and benefits of GH, there remains a notable research gap concerning the nuanced processes through which knowledge is managed between customers or users and companies within the GH framework. This study aims to address this gap by providing new insights into how companies strategically harness knowledge

gained from user interactions and data to drive GH initiatives. Employing an inductive qualitative research design, this study conducts in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including CEOs, managers, and consultants, from companies actively employing GH strategies. The research contributes to the academic literature on GH by offering a comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in knowledge management within GH implementation. By delving into the intricacies of customer-company interaction, this study adds depth to the theoretical foundations of GH as a strategic and innovative approach. The insights gleaned from this research offer actionable guidance for companies, managers, and entrepreneurs seeking to optimize their GH endeavours. Moreover, the study's findings serve as a basis for further academic exploration and refinement of GH theories and strategies, ultimately fostering continuous improvement and innovation in the field of growth hacking.

Keywords – growth hacking, customer knowledge management, knowledge exchange, customer-centric approach, data-driven

Paper type – Academic Research

1 Introduction

In the fast-paced realm of contemporary business, GH has become a focal point for companies seeking rapid expansion and sustained success (Bargoni et al., 2024a; Cavallo et al., 2023; Sanasi et al., 2023). It has reshaped the traditional paradigms of company development, leveraging innovative strategies (Troise et al., 2021) that integrate big data analytics, rapid experimentation, and a continuous learning ethos (Ellis & Brown, 2017). According to Ellis (2010), GH is defined as “that process of rapid experimentation that links marketing and information and communications technology to identify the most effective and efficient ways to grow a business”. In terms of efficiency, GH saves costs due to the network advantage of the Internet and data-rich properties (Ellis, 2014). In terms of effectiveness, GH breaks traditional marketing notions to relentlessly pursue users and growth (Holiday, 2014).

The essence of GH lies in its ability to engrave data-driven decision-making within a company, utilizing an iterative approach to innovation and rapid prototype design to discern and meet customer needs along the entire customer journey (Bohnsack and Liesner, 2019; Sultana et al., 2022). This approach is underscored by the utilization of traceable marketing tools, enabling the analysis of data from individual stages of the customer journey or funnel to make informed decisions. Moreover, GH embodies a data-driven paradigm in which companies meticulously analyse user behaviour, iterate marketing tactics and identify key performance indicators to strengthen their customer base and increase sales (Bargoni et al., 2023; Cavallo et al., 2019; Falasca et al., 2017; Lamperti et al., 2023).

Initially, GH has captivated the attention of industry professionals and practitioners through a variety of mediums such as books, blogs, and web articles.

These sources have aimed to elucidate the concept, its utilization methods, and the potential benefits it can bring (Ellis, 2014; Holiday, 2014, 2012). In recent times, scholars have delved into GH from a scientific perspective, examining the potential outcomes of its implementation within companies. A pivotal shift in perspective occurred with the work of Sanasi et al. (2023), challenging traditional assumptions. Their focus on the persistent role of entrepreneurial experimentation during the scaling phase of digital platform startups redefined GH. It was no longer seen as solely a startup-centric phenomenon but rather as an enduring strategy adaptable to various business stages. Conway and Hemphill (2019) made a substantial contribution by framing GH as a crucial mindset for achieving rapid expansion, especially when faced with limited marketing budgets. They emphasized the necessity for adaptability and resourcefulness. This resonates with the findings of Cavallo et al. (2023), who introduced a simulation method named Dynamic Business Modelling (DBM) for Scaling. Their work underscored the importance of strategic approaches in assessing the impact of GH during business model scaling. Advancements in the theoretical understanding of GH were put forth by Bargoni et al. (2023), who presented multiple research propositions related to the capabilities and routines developed by companies for international markets and expansion. Bohnsack and Liesner (2019) contributed by demystifying GH and introducing a comprehensive framework and taxonomy of GH patterns. Troisi et al. (2020) demonstrated that applying GH to B2B marketing strategies benefits from a data-oriented mindset. This approach can generate economic, knowledge-based, and marketing advantages throughout the entire supply chain, enhancing relationships with customers. Finally, GH, as stated in recent studies (Bargoni et al. 2024a, 2024b), not only facilitates the transition from strategy definition to implementation but also serves as a valuable tool for minimizing innovation failure risks. In the first study, GH was portrayed as a dynamic approach promoting business model scalability and effective resource management, bridging the gap between strategy definition and implementation. The second study explored GH's application as a data-driven process to minimize innovation failure risks at various organizational levels.

Moreover, at the heart of GH principles lies the transformative power of data, transcending mere informational repositories to become a catalyst for knowledge creation cycle (Santoro et al., 2018; Troisi et al., 2020). This iterative process engenders a culture of perpetual learning within organizations, fostering an environment ripe for the cultivation of organizational knowledge (Pérez-Bustamante, 1999; Trabucchi & Buganza, 2019). Another compelling facet of GH lies in its interactive dynamic, where the exchange of insights between customers and companies serves as a fertile ground for the amalgamation of tacit and explicit knowledge (Intezari & Gressel, 2017; Martínez-Martínez et al., 2022). This symbiotic relationship not only enriches the learning ecosystem but also engenders a deeper understanding of customer needs and market dynamics.

Moreover, GH espouses a circular process of continuous improvement, wherein knowledge gleaned from customer interactions fuels subsequent iterations of growth strategies (Santoro et al., 2018; Troisi et al., 2020). In this dynamic interaction, customer knowledge management emerges as a cornerstone, forming the basis on which GH strategies are built and business trajectories are shaped. Recognizing customers not only as end users but as invaluable reservoirs of external knowledge (Storey & Larbig, 2018), companies engage in a multifaceted process of acquiring, disseminating, and utilizing customer knowledge (Chiu et al., 2022). Central to this effort is the strategic management of customer relationships, supported by the use of big data analytics and cognitive technologies (George et al., 2014). Through the lens of business analytics, companies delve into the vast array of social media data (Troise et al., 2022c), extracting useful information that informs personalized customer interactions and drives innovation (Bargoni et al., 2023; Holsapple et al., 2018).

Despite the growing body of literature on GH, there exists a noticeable research gap concerning the nuanced processes through which knowledge is managed between customers or users and companies in the context of GH implementation. While existing studies have shed light on the overarching principles and benefits of GH, a detailed examination of the mechanisms underlying customers knowledge management within this framework is conspicuously absent.

Specifically, the existing literature tends to focus on the broad strokes of GH, such as its reliance on data analytics, rapid experimentation, and resource-light tactics. However, there is a lack of granularity in understanding how companies effectively gather, process, and leverage customer insights to drive growth. The current state of research does not sufficiently address the complexities of translating data into actionable knowledge within the GH paradigm, leaving a void in our comprehension of the detailed processes involved.

Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the limited literature on GH by providing new insights on how companies strategically harness knowledge gained from user interactions and data to drive GH initiatives.

This study adopts an inductive qualitative research design, leveraging in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (e.g., CEOs, managers, and consultants) from companies actively employing GH strategies. The interviews, conducted over a specified period, aim to extract rich data that unveils the strategies and dynamics at play. Furthermore, secondary data like press, social media and websites of companies/platforms, are used to support primary data.

This research contributes to the academic literature on GH by offering a more comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in knowledge management within GH implementation. It goes beyond the broad strokes of GH principles and tactics, adding depth to the theoretical foundations of this strategic and innovative approach. The insights into customer-company interaction, the development of metrics, and the exploration of emerging

technologies (Troise et al., 2022a) offer actionable guidance for companies, managers, entrepreneurs, aiming to optimize their GH endeavors. The study's findings can serve as a basis for further academic exploration and refinement of GH theories and strategies.

2 Theoretical background

The literature on GH emphasizes its efficacy in addressing the challenges of dynamic markets by leveraging customer-company interaction as a vital source of knowledge. GH's iterative and data-driven approach enables rapid adaptation to changing consumer preferences, enhancing product-market fit (Bohnsack & Liesner, 2019). Agile experimentation facilitates the identification of optimal growth channels tailored to specific target audiences (Ellis & Brown, 2017). Furthermore, GH optimizes customer acquisition costs and retention rates, fostering sustained business growth (Bargoni et al., 2024a; Ellis, 2010). Digital technologies and analytics tools enhance the implementation of GH strategies (Bresciani et al., 2021; Troise et al., 2022b, 2023c), emphasizing data-driven decision-making for refining marketing tactics and attracting customers (Bargoni et al., 2023; Cavallo et al., 2019; Lamperti et al., 2023).

Customer knowledge management (CKM) and big data analytics (BDA) have emerged as critical components in contemporary business strategies, particularly in the context of GH. Storey and Larbig (2018) emphasized the significance of viewing customers as external knowledge resources, highlighting their active involvement in service design processes. This notion is reinforced by Chiu et al. (2022), who underscored the integral role of customer insights in fostering growth. Aghamirian et al. (2015) and Chiu et al. (2022) further elaborated on the multifaceted utility of customer knowledge, encompassing customer categorization, retention, acquisition, product/service enhancement, innovation, and market understanding. Gebert et al. (2003) elucidated CKM as the process of acquiring, creating, disseminating, sharing, representing, and storing customer knowledge, which serves as the cornerstone for building profitable customer relationships. Khosravi & Hussin (2018) and Taherparvar et al. (2014) delineated the operational facets of CKM, focusing on the acquisition, sharing, transfer, and utilization of diverse customer-related data, information, knowledge, experiences, and ideas. Strategic management of customer relationships, facilitated by CKM, is identified by Chaithanapat & Rakthin (2021) and Khosravi and Hussin (2018) as instrumental in optimizing GH endeavours. Moreover, Bargoni et al. (2024a) emphasized the symbiotic relationship between customer knowledge and GH efficacy, stressing the importance of informed decision-making and proactive engagement with evolving customer needs. BDA, as an enabler of knowledge management, according to George et al. (2014), empowered organizations to unearth hidden insights and generate new knowledge through the processing, capture, and sharing of vast amounts of structured and unstructured data (Chen

et al., 2012). Troisi et al. (2020) elaborated on the transformative potential of BDA in deciphering customer behaviours and preferences, facilitated by cognitive technologies like text mining, sentiment analysis, and user profiling (Del et al., 2020; Troisi et al., 2020; Visvizi et al., 2022). These insights enabled businesses to personalize interactions, customize offers, identify market trends, develop innovative solutions, and enhance decision-making processes (Bello-Orgaz et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2010; McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2012). Within the realm of business analytics, social media analytics emerged as a foundational element for implementing GH strategies (Bargoni et al., 2023; Holsapple et al., 2018). In this context, Del Vecchio et al. (2018, 2020) highlighted its efficacy in social customer relationship management and managing voluminous data from diverse online sources.

3 Methodology

This section clarifies the methodological considerations guiding our research on the relationship between knowledge dynamics and GH. Recognizing the novelty of exploring these connections empirically, the study adopts an inductive qualitative approach to theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Yin, 2014). Through interviews, open-ended essays, and supplementary data collection from various sources, the research aims to generate novel insights into the phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The selection of participants encompasses a diverse range of companies (Troise et al., 2023a), including startups, SMEs, large enterprises, and GH consultancies, reflecting the broad applicability of GH across industries. Table 1 shows the sample characteristics and the respondents included in our study.

Table 1 – Characteristics of the sample and respondents

| Participant code | Business sector/type | Value proposition | Company size | Position |
|------------------|------------------------------|---|--------------|--------------------|
| #01 | Sport | Digital platform for making smart wellness relationships and context | small | CEO, Growth hacker |
| #02 | Accommodation and co-working | Digital platform for living spaces creation that fosters new beginnings with a welcoming home | small | Growth hacker |
| #03 | Entertainment | Digital platform for local event management and planning | micro | Founder, CEO |
| #04 | EdTech | Digital platform based on data and AI to simplify educational learning and save time | small | Growth hacker |
| #05 | Travel and tourism | Digital platform for organizing and sharing tourism experiences for the younger generation | small | Head of growth |
| #06 | EdTech | Digital platform for sharing crowd-sourced study resources with gamified learning experience | large | Growth hacker |
| #07 | Travel and tourism | Digital platform for sharing passion for travel and events | medium | Growth hacker |

| | | | | |
|-----|--|--|-------|--------------------------|
| #08 | Entertainment and gaming | Digital platform for creating and monetizing your own gaming community | micro | Founder, Growth hacker |
| #09 | Footwear clothing | Digital platform for reviving and preserving the ancient traditions of sustainable craftsmanship | small | Founder, Head of growth |
| #10 | Pharmaceutical and IT services | Digital platform for simplifying and managing reservations | micro | Founder |
| #11 | Strategy, consulting and business growth | Strategic business consulting and implementation of digital projects for businesses engaged in achieving sustainable success | small | Growth hacker consultant |
| #12 | Strategy, consulting and business growth | Strategic business consulting and implementation of data-driven and customer-centric growth strategies | micro | Growth hacker consultant |

Data collection spans two years and involves semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and open-ended essays, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of GH processes and outcomes. This approach enables flexibility in probing emerging themes and ensures rich, detailed responses from participants (Troise, 2022). Secondary sources are also utilized to triangulate findings and enhance validity (Troise et al., 2023b).

The data analysis process involves recording and transcribing interview responses, with additional inquiries made to fill in missing or incomplete information. We analyzed our data through an interpretive approach following Gioia et al. (2013) guidelines for analyzing qualitative data, to condense the body of data and structure our interpretive scheme (Cloutier and Ravasi, 2021; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Codes were iteratively refined, and themes emerged, structured around two overarching dimensions: knowledge resources management and customer knowledge management in GH implementation.

4 Preliminary findings

Our findings provide valuable insights into the effective management of knowledge resources and customer knowledge within the GH implementation process. By examining the practices and strategies employed by companies across various industries, we elucidate the critical role of experimentation, data utilization, customer-centricity, and social media engagement in driving growth and innovation. The following analysis is organized into two main sections, each built around the dimensions of our data structure to guide the reader through our inductive reasoning (Figure 1).

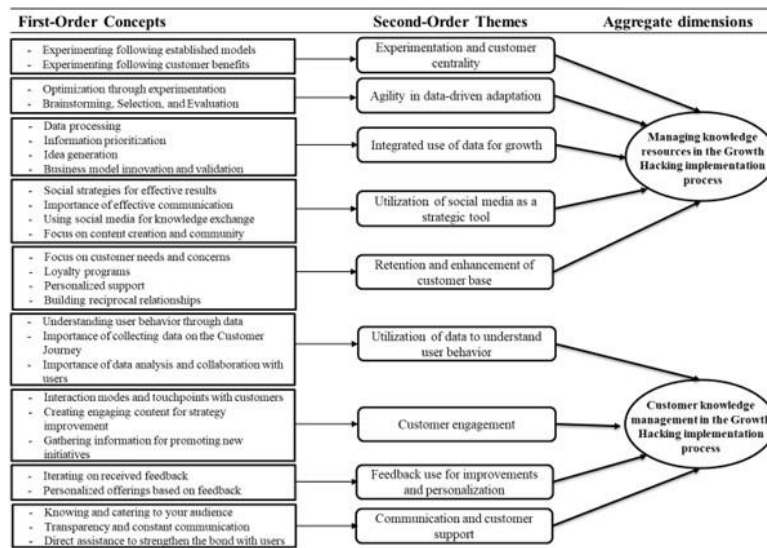


Figure 1. Data structure

4.1 Managing knowledge resources in the growth hacking implementation process

Experimentation emerged as a cornerstone of GH strategies. Companies implementing GH strategies prioritize experimentation, often following established models, leveraging existing frameworks and methodologies to guide their initiatives. About this aspect, a GH consultant said *“Experimentation is fundamental for us. We constantly test new ideas and approaches, following the example of large groups like Amazon and Zalando.”* #11. This approach demonstrates the importance of learning from industry leaders and adapting their methods to suit specific business needs and objectives.

Furthermore, respondents recognized that failure is an inherent part of the experimentation process and utilized data to identify areas for improvement: *“Experimentation and data give us the opportunity to understand where and how we make mistakes.”* #08.

In these processes, the integration of customer feedback emerged as an important aspect. Several respondents stated that they actively seek and incorporate customer insights to refine their products or services, ensuring alignment with customer needs and preferences, as the CEO of a clothing brand company stated *“We’ve used real-time analysis to anticipate demand fluctuations, allowing us to quickly adjust our production program. This agility not only enabled us to promptly meet customer expectations but also minimized waste, in line with our commitment to sustainability.”* #09. Further, responses emphasized that the process of agility in data-driven adaptation encompasses brainstorming ideas, selecting the most promising ones, and evaluating their potential impact.

Other respondents underscored the importance of balancing data-driven decision-making with a focus on customer experience. For example, a GH consultant said *"We don't just rely on data; we go beyond, always keeping customer experience at the centre, because numerical values are crucial, but experimentation is always oriented towards the customer's benefit."* #11. In this sense, while data provides valuable insights, companies should prioritize customer benefit to ensure sustainable growth. Thus, by aligning experimentation with customer needs and preferences, companies can optimize their strategies for long-term success.

Another emerged aspect is that companies prioritize the efficient processing of data to extract valuable insights for driving growth. This involves collecting, analysing, and interpreting data to inform decision-making and strategy development. Some experts and growth hackers, in fact, said *"We transform the data obtained through experimentation and applying know-how to different projects, adapting strategies based on market outputs."* #11, and that *"The data are then used to innovate and scale our business model, such as developing new learning formats or customizing the user experience."* #06.

Within the GH framework, companies prioritize information based on its relevance and potential impact on business objectives. As the CEO of a gaming platform shared *"We use the ICE Score model to evaluate ideas and initiatives based on collected data, identifying those with the highest impact, confidence, and ease of implementation. This analysis has allowed us to understand the product-market fit and the AHA Moment, as well as providing insights on how to scale the company."* #08. In support of this, a respondent said *"Data allow us to validate new ideas before implementing them on a large scale, reducing risk and increasing the likelihood of success."* #09. This ensures that resources are allocated effectively to initiatives with the highest likelihood of success.

Moreover, respondents are shown to integrate data across various stages of the growth process, from idea generation to strategy implementation and scalability: *"Initially, we focused our efforts on user growth without deeply delving into validating the business model. This was because we believed it was essential to reach a critical mass of users to ensure the long-term success of our product or service. However, we realized that neglecting this aspect could lead to problems in the future. So, we began testing and validating our business model, even if initially we only earned a few cents. It was a crucial step that allowed us to adapt our approach and ensure that our business was sustainable in the long run."* #08. This suggests a holistic approach where data informs decision-making at every step, driving innovation and validating business models.

Social media emerged as a crucial platform for GH, with strategies emphasizing effective communication, content creation, and community engagement. The interviews revealed that leveraging social media for knowledge exchange underscores its role not only in marketing but also in gathering insights and

fostering relationships with customers. For example, the head of growth of a travel company stated that *"The Facebook groups, operating in 5 different markets, are a key tool. Here, travellers can request information from other users, creating a fundamental exchange of experiences both for them and for us. This allows the exchange of information and opinions that are crucial both from the user side and from the company side to understand extremely important information."* #07.

The respondents' companies also leveraged social media as a strategic tool to engage with their target audience effectively. As stated by the founder of an entertainment innovative startup *"Our first contact with the market occurred through the company's Instagram profile. We focus efforts on creating engaging visual content, using A/B testing to determine which generates the most positive responses. Data analysis guides us in creating engaging visual content to maximize user attention."* #03. This involves developing tailored social strategies to enhance brand visibility, drive customer engagement, and foster community interaction.

Respondents also indicated that content creation and community engagement are central to leveraging social media for knowledge exchange and customer retention. In this regard, a growth hacker of an edtech company said *"We differentiate ourselves from competitors by focusing on creating content and community on Instagram, TikTok, and blogs. Our target audience is Generation Z, and since we didn't have a budget for advertising, our growth has been primarily organic, with sales generated through knowledge gained via social media and community."* #04.

Moreover, some respondents implementing GH strategies place a strong emphasis on understanding and addressing customer needs and concerns. For example, a growth hacker of a small accommodation platform stated *"Understanding customers' goals and ambitions has allowed us to align our services with their aspirations, offering relevant support and resources."* #02. This also involves proactive measures such as personalized support, loyalty programs, and post-purchase customer service to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. As reported by a GH consultant *"Retention is essential. Post-purchase customer service, often overlooked, is fundamental to building a relationship with the customer. Continued interest beyond the purchase generates reciprocity and provides valuable data to improve the product."* #12.

4.2 Customer knowledge management in the growth hacking implementation process

Understanding user behaviour through data and analysing the customer journey are identified as critical aspects of GH. Some respondents utilized data extensively to understand both platform achievements and individual psychological and behavioural aspects, aiding in the development of targeted strategies and personalized offerings. As the founder of a sports platform suggested *"We use a vast amount of data to understand user behaviour. We use*

two categories of data: those related to the platform's achievements and those we collect to better understand individuals' psychological and behavioural aspects." #01.

Moreover, collaboration with users and resolving obstacles through analytics reflected a data-driven approach to optimizing user experience. In fact, a GH consultant said *"Consumer behaviour analysis has allowed us, through constant A/B testing, to optimize the user experience and consequently our conversion rate."* #12.

GH involves engaging customers through various touchpoints and creating compelling content to enhance strategy effectiveness. As a respondent said *"Our proactive approach to interacting with customers through surveys has been crucial in informing our marketing strategies, service improvements, and customer satisfaction initiatives."* #02.

Community involvement and gathering information for new initiatives highlight the role of customer engagement in driving growth. As one respondent suggested *"We involve users in activities such as focus groups to develop new services, and in beta programs to test new features, offering them an active role in the development process."* #06. Similarly, the growth manager of a travel company said *"We are obsessed with reviews and social proof. We conduct surveys before and after the trip, collecting feedback on every aspect of the experience. This information is vital to continually improving the organization, coordinators' behaviour, and value for money."* #07.

Respondents also underscored the iterative nature of GH, with companies iterating on feedback to personalize offerings and enhance customer satisfaction. As reported by a respondent *"The data we collect from users is critical to personalizing the in-app experience. Each user can express their preferences, influencing the events displayed on the app's home page. We use feedback from users and organizers to develop solutions and introduce new features on the platform."* #03. This highlights the importance of continuous improvement based on user input.

Effective communication and direct assistance were also identified by respondents as key strategies for strengthening relationships with users. Transparent and constant communication with customers builds trust and strengthens the bond between the brand and its community. In light of this, a respondent said *"We are constantly updating the community on social about new features and events. We explain through posts and stories how to use new features, inviting users to try them out and give us feedback."* #03.

Moreover, the interviews revealed that organizing touchpoints tailored to industry needs and product/service types ensures effective communication and support throughout the customer journey. As a growth manager explained *"The presence of a support service on WhatsApp has been crucial for us in terms of positive word of mouth. It has allowed us to respond to users' needs in a timely and direct manner, creating a crucial link with the community."* #07.

5 Conclusions

GH represents a dynamic and innovative approach to business growth, emphasizing the strategic management of knowledge resources between companies and their customers. Through in-depth interviews and open-ended essays with key stakeholders actively engaged in GH strategies, this research has unveiled critical insights into the nuanced processes of knowledge management within GH implementation.

This study contributes valuable insights into the strategic management of knowledge resources within GH implementation, offering actionable guidance for companies, managers, and entrepreneurs – especially in terms of entrepreneurial teams (Troise et al. 2024) – seeking to optimize their GH endeavours. By delving into the intricacies of customer-company interaction and emphasizing the iterative nature of GH, this research enriches the theoretical foundations of GH as a strategic and innovative approach to business growth. Moreover, the findings serve as a basis for further academic exploration and refinement of GH theories and strategies, ultimately fostering continuous improvement and innovation in the field of GH.

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