
Internationalisation of an Austrian SME with a sales agent to Mexico and the USA in the automotive sector

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Abstract: Many Austrian small and medium-sized enterprise (SMEs) in the manufacturing sector opt for expanding to further markets. Especially for the automotive industry, Mexico and the USA are attractive locations. The purpose of this paper is to identify a strategy for an Austrian SME in the automotive sector for its business expansion to Mexico and the USA. Therefore, factors influencing the expansion strategy, as well as operational measures increasing the success rate of the company are identified. Additionally, it is analysed if a combined market entry and strategy formulation for both countries is recommendable. The aim is to present solid results regarding how the company should tackle the upcoming challenges for its strategic direction of

internationalisation. For this purpose, a literature review and an empirical qualitative study were chosen as a main method. Based on the results of the study the company is provided with recommendations on how to design its strategy and which factors are to be considered when opting for the two markets. Based on the research the company is advised to consider both markets as individual and parallel processes.

Keywords: SME internationalisation; business expansion; market entry strategy; market development; USA; Mexico.

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1 Introduction

As a result of globalisation, the importance of international expansion is growing. Multinational enterprises (MNEs) make use of different market entry strategies, which are examined in detail in existing literature, as well as through best practice examples. However, the same principles often do not apply to small and medium-sized enterprise (SMEs). In general, they are said to be limited in tangible and financial resources, as well as being considered more adaptable, more innovative, and offer quicker response times that can be guaranteed. SMEs mostly make up more than 90% of all firms with between a quarter and half of the exports from Europe originating from them. These facts already highlight the importance of SMEs in the world economy. However, research and literature mainly focuses on MNEs. It is crucial to consider advantages, as well as limitations, when creating an expansion strategy [Knight, (2015), p.4].

GST Gesellschaft für Schleiftechnik GmbH (GST) is an automotive manufacturer that provides machines to original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and tier-1 suppliers in the automotive industry. Expansion plays a crucial role in their business model. GST is a niche player, whose accuracy and reliability is highly recognised by customers. Therefore, they depend upon the private knowledge they own [Knight, (2015), p.4]. Resulting from this, the accumulation of automotive companies has observed an increase in development of clusters. Especially, the Mexican and US market are growing in importance for the automotive industry (Außenwirtschaft Austria, 2016). Besides the initial market entry, a strategy needs to be planned precisely in order to make best use of the limited financial resources so that the best possible outcome can be reached [Kennedy and Keeney, (2009), pp.260–261; Knight, (2015), p.4].

The increasing globalisation and resulting SME expansion has led to plenty of studies regarding the topic. Research streams have developed, among others about born globals, international new ventures and international entrepreneurship [Schweizer, (2012), p.745]. Most literature about SME internationalisation highlights the differences to MNEs, as for example the lack of tangible and financial resources, experiences, as well as focus on global niche markets [Knight, (2015), p.4; Schweizer, (2012), p.745]. However, SMEs are more adaptable, more likely to be innovative and the response times are shorter, when applying new ideas and meet a customer's needs [Knight, (2015), p.4]. Those characteristics enable SMEs to obtain comparative advantages from their size and overcome the issue of limited resources. Especially born globals usually serve niche markets and are high technology companies, where flexibility and innovation is high in demand. In general, those companies are said to internationalise their business at or near

their founding [Knight, (2015), p.4]. However, growing internationalisation of SMEs bring new issues, which formerly were reserved for larger companies. Especially those in the high-technology or manufacturing sector need to bear in mind the increasing risks and opportunities by global competition [Knight, (2015), p.10; Ruzzier et al., (2006), p.476].

The success of SMEs in global markets is defined through different factors, among others entrepreneurial, external and internal ones. Those may vary among countries due to economic, geographical and cultural differences [Ensari and Erdilek, (2014), p.192]. Some of the internal success factors found in research are strong leadership on top, strong management team, management team's international experience, product quality, satisfying customer's needs, the ability to develop and sustain technological advantage, the ability to identify and focus on one or several market niches/regionalisation, strategic use of information technology, the implementation of strategy, the availability of financial-technological resources, strategic alliances, and use of internet [Ensari and Erdilek, (2014), p.194].

Contrary, as a reason for business failures of SMEs factors were perceived such as lack of managerial expertise, poor management and management inability, inadequate staff and learning failures, quality failures, institutional weakness, shortage of resources, inadequate capital/poor economic conditions, lack of institutional support and cooperation and networking, and lack of technical competencies [Ensari and Erdilek, (2014), p.19; Zarei et al., (2011), p.299].

Nowadays, not just MNEs are facing international challenges, but internationalisation itself has become a widely discussed topic. Reasons for the internationalisation of SMEs are the increased competitive pressure and the reduction of subsidies and protection. Small companies are attracted by the prospects of internationalisation, such as profit, excess capacity, increased foreign demand, and governmental support [Zarei et al., (2011), p.299].

During the internationalisation process, market knowledge and the ability to assimilate information are crucial, so that companies are able to provide the demanded products and gather a comparative advantage over their competition [Felício et al., (2016), p.1373; Yeoh, (2004), p.515]. Internationalisation requires client contact and specialised, market-focused knowledge in order to be successful [Felício et al., (2016), p.1373; Cumming et al., 2009; Keupp and Gassmann, 2009]. Other important factors also account for appropriate networks, knowledge accumulation and operation mode alterations [Liesch et al., (2002), p.21]. Through the gathered information through the networks, a company is provided with better access to resources, risks. This way, uncertainties that accompany the international business are reduced, as well as opportunities are easier to be detected. Furthermore, knowledge acquisition and resource development are promoted [Felício et al., (2016), p.1373; Liesch et al., (2002), p.21].

The aim of this paper is to provide indications for GST on how to tackle their internationalisation with a sales agent to Mexico and the USA.

After introduction the paper presents the methodology in Section 2. Section 3 describes the results of a survey research conducted by the authors and Section 4 is discussion of the results. In Section 5, the conclusions offer a future outlook and limitations and implications for further research.

2 Methodology

This paper aims to provide indications for GST on how to tackle their internationalisation with a sales agent to Mexico and the USA. For this purpose, data and information from literature, a quantitative analysis, and interviews were gathered.

For the purpose of the research and based on the literature research the following research questions and assumptions were elaborated:

- RQ1 Which specific factors influence the expansion strategy of GST with a sales agent in Mexico and the USA?
- A1 Expansion strategy with a sales agent in the USA and Mexico is influenced by:
 - A1.1 company internal factors
 - A1.2 industry and market specific factors
 - A1.3 the culture of the focal company and the targeted markets
 - A1.4 the market entry choice and internationalisation factors.
- RQ2 Which operational measures increase the success rate for GST's internationalisation in Mexico and the USA?
- A2 Operational factors increasing the success rate of GST's internationalisation to Mexico and the USA are:
 - A2.1 establishing a stable network and strategic partnerships
 - A2.2 gather market knowledge
 - A2.3 the degree of innovation
 - A2.4 the availability and usage of resources
 - A2.5 location factors
 - A2.6 the sales process
 - A2.7 the after-sales service.
- RQ3 Is a combined market entry and strategy formulation with a sales agent to Mexico and the USA advisable for GST?
- A3 A combined market entry and strategy formulation with a sales agent to Mexico and the USA is advisable for GST.

For a better understanding of both markets and to be able to make a comparison, a brief statistical analysis for the years 2011 to 2015 has been carried out. For this purpose, the following indicators for both countries were selected: GDP, GDP growth, light vehicle sales, motor vehicle production, political risk index, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, as well as the corruption perception index. On the one hand, graphs were drawn in order to compare both countries over the years while, on the other hand, the correlations between specific factors were made. In order to do so, the programs SAS Enterprise Guide and excel were used. For the correlations, the first step was for the data to be assessed for normal distribution. If a normal distribution is observed, the 'Pearson correlation' is applied, or else the 'Spearman correlation' will correspond. In order to analyse the data for normal distribution, the 'Kolmogorov-Smirnoff-test' is executed. The variable CPI for Mexico was the only one being normally distributed, as it was below

0.05. As all the other variables are normally distributed, the ‘Pearson correlation’ was used for further elaborations and for testing the hypothesis.

Furthermore, a questionnaire was designed so that interviews were conducted for the empirical study. The questionnaire was used as a guideline and was not followed strictly one question at a time, as not all companies can provide the same pre-conditions. For example, not all are active to the same degree in both markets and neither has chosen the same market entry strategy. As such, interviews were held in a semi-structured way and handed out to all interview partners in advance. The guiding questionnaire can be found in the Appendix. For the interviews, three different target groups were identified, as companies similar to those of GST, client from GST, consulting and advising entities including the Austrian Chamber of Commerce. In total, 11 interviews were conducted. Most of them were carried out face-to-face. However, some of them took place via telephone or Skype, if the circumstances did not allow a direct interview, such as if the interview partner lived in the USA. Depending on the company, some questions were left out if no information could be provided. For the group of consulting and advising entities, the questionnaire was adapted in general in order to leave out non-relevant questions.

All of the 11 interviews took place between February and May 2017. They were transcribed in the following months. As a result of the company’s sensitive data, no interviewee and company names are stated.

For the analysis, Mayring’s (2014) ‘qualitative content analysis’ was used. He argues that it should be started from the basis of quantitative analysis, but the process should be conceptualised with the assignment of categories [Mayring, (2014), p.10]. This is why inductive category formation was used. For this purpose, not all of the material is included, but only that what is considered relevant. The different research questions were labelled with different main and subcategories. Main categories of research question 1 were market entry, market and culture; of research question 2 sales strategy, after-sales-service, location, and resources and; of research question 3 combination of markets and sales person acceptance. Categories were revised in between, in order to not overlook important data and neither include irrelevant one.

The following hypotheses were established and the results gathered by the analysis. The null hypothesis for all is H0: There is no relation between the variables.

- H1a There is a relation between the GDP of Mexico and the light vehicle sales of Mexico.
- H1b There is a relation between the GDP of the US and the light vehicle sales of the US.
- H2a There is a relation between the GDP of Mexico and the motor vehicle production of Mexico.
- H2b There is a relation between the GDP of the US and the motor vehicle production of the US.
- H3a There is a relation between the GDP of Mexico and the PRI of Mexico.
- H3b There is a relation between the GDP of the US and the PRI of the US.
- H4a There is a relation between the GDP of Mexico and the CPI of Mexico.
- H4b There is a relation between the GDP of the US and the CPI of the US.

3 Results of the empirical study

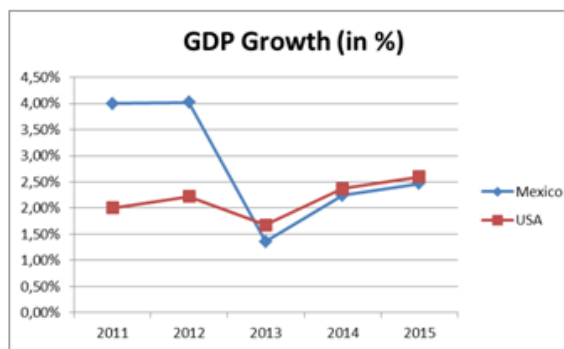
3.1 Statistical analysis

In this chapter, first a brief statistical analysis of Mexico and US for the years 2011 to 2015 is presented.

Figures 1–6 show the following indicators for both countries: GDP, GDP growth, light vehicle sales, motor vehicle production, political risk index, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, as well as the corruption perception index.

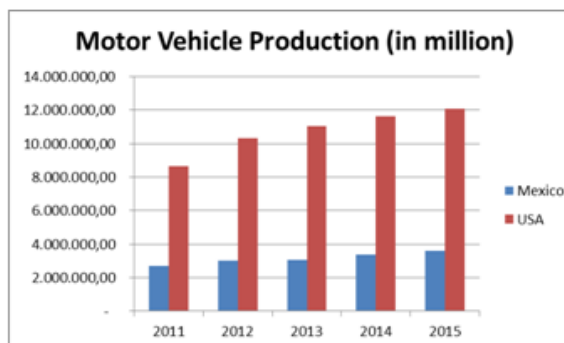
The automotive industry is highly significant in Mexico and is still gaining importance each year. Not surprisingly, in 2016 an all-time record in automotive production and export was reached. Respective clusters have been formed and about 150 automotive manufacturing facilities established (Außenwirtschaft Austria, 2016). As a result from the NAFTA agreement, Mexico has become an attractive market for many companies. However, despite economic growth and development, the country is concerned with issues such as corruption, bribes and rule of law (Heritage, 2017).

Figure 1 GDP growth (see online version for colours)



Source: INEGI (2017) and USA.gov (2017)

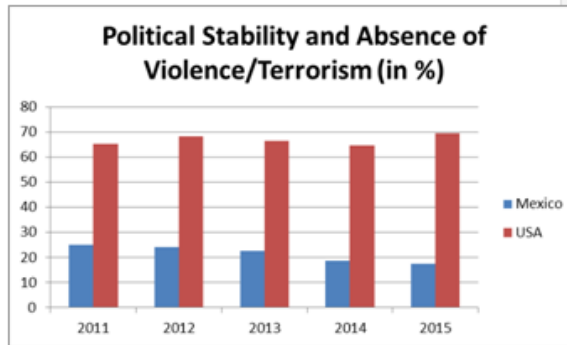
Figure 2 Motor vehicle production (see online version for colours)



Source: INEGI (2017) and USA.gov (2017)

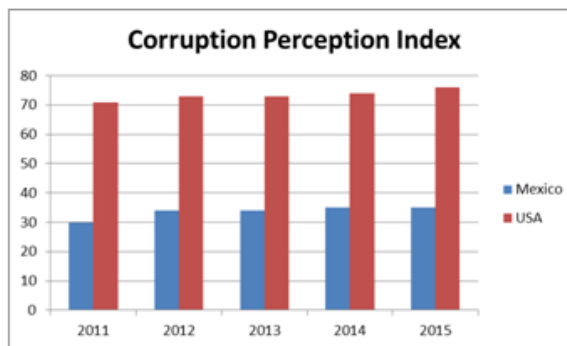
Figure 1 shows that after an extreme GDP growth in both countries in 2011 and 2012, economic growth slowed down in 2013, but rose again after 2014.

Figure 3 Political stability and the absence of violence/terrorism (see online version for colours)



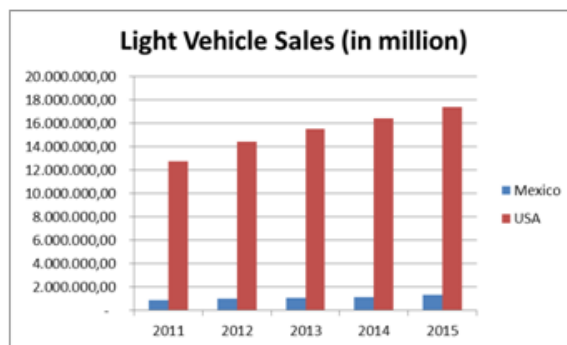
Source: INEGI (2017) and USA.gov (2017)

Figure 4 Corruption perception index (see online version for colours)

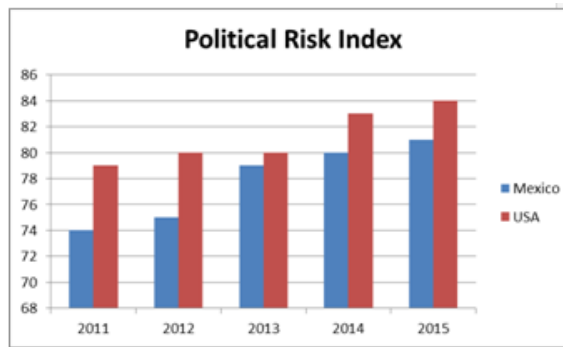


Source: INEGI (2017) and USA.gov (2017)

Figure 5 Light vehicle sales (see online version for colours)



Source: INEGI (2017) and USA.gov (2017)

Figure 6 Political risk index (see online version for colours)

Source: INEGI (2017) and USA.gov (2017)

Table 1 Pearson correlations

	<i>Mexico GDP</i>	<i>USA GDP</i>
Mexico sales	-0.08272	0.96901
	0.8948	0.0065
USA sales	0.23902	0.98785
	0.6986	0.0016
Mexico production	0.10769	0.98970
	0.8632	0.0013
USA production	0.31619	0.95532
	0.6042	0.0113
Mexico PRI	0.35717	0.95465
	0.5551	0.0115
USA PRI	0.08232	0.95865
	0.8953	0.0100
Mexico CPI	0.36700	0.83484
	0.5434	0.0785
USA CPI	-0.04039	0.96317
	0.9486	0.0084

Source: Own calculations

Figure 2 shows that motor vehicle production continuously grew from 2011 to 2015 in both countries.

Despite the indications that the political risk and corruption is shrinking, the index regarding political stability, as well as absence of violence, or terrorism, is slightly decreasing, which is contradictory. The results of the corruption perception index in both countries are presented in the Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows that corruption perception index is better in US and is decreasing in both countries.

Figure 5 shows the light vehicles sales continuously increased over the years in both countries.

Figure 6 shows that throughout the years 2011 to 2015 the political risk index decreased.

The US automotive market is the largest automotive producer after China and a steady growth throughout the years is perceived. The industry is mainly concentrated in Detroit where most of the main OEMs, tier-1 and tier-2 suppliers are located, as well as the southern states are another popular area (Außenwirtschaft Austria, 2016). The US has the largest economy worldwide and in general has a stable political environment. Nonetheless, inequality in the country is relatively high and the term of office by president Trump is concerning many experts (OECD, 2014; The Economist, 2016).

Next, correlations between specific factors were made. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that:

- GDP is correlated with the light vehicle sales of the US. The result is highly significant with and error rate of 0.0016.
- GDP is correlated with the motor vehicle production of the US. The result is highly significant with and error rate of 0.0113.
- GDP is correlated with the PRI of the US. The result is highly significant with and error rate of 0.01.
- GDP is correlated with the CPI of the US. The result is highly significant with and error rate of 0.0084.

It can be derived from these results that the hypotheses H1b, H2b, H3b, and H4b are accepted. Moreover, this means that hypotheses H1a, H2a, H3a, and H4a are rejected and therefore, the H0 for each one is accepted.

3.2 Results from interviews

Results from the in-depth-interviews with the industry experts are presented according to the following main categories:

- 1 market entry
- 2 market development, opportunities and risks
- 3 culture and sales person characteristics
- 4 sales strategy
- 5 after-sales-service
- 6 location
- 7 combination of markets
- 8 sales/service person acceptance.

3.2.1 Market entry

The category market entry had the purpose to identify material related to the market entry mode and the companies' drivers. Those sub-categories were divided into Mexico, USA, and general. For the market entry, 60 statements were highlighted.

Regarding their market entry in Mexico, four companies made a comment. Three of the companies work together with partners or representatives, while only one founded a company and has a sales structure on their own. Drivers of the market entry mode of a sales agent mainly guarantee service and too little market potential was mentioned. Additionally, as general reasons for opting for Mexico, it was mentioned that they followed main clients and wanted to save costs.

For the market entry in the USA, six companies made a comment. Just one has stated to solely work with a partner. All others have at least partly established their own sales – and service structure. Three companies work together with partners, or have outsourced their service. One of the companies made the market entry through an acquisition. Additionally, the client stated to have a sales-structure and Advantage Austria USA highlighted the possibility of starting with an external or internal sales person. Four companies made a relevant comment regarding market entry mode drivers. Two companies stated these as reasons for working together with partners besides their own structure, which is that due to the size of the market. A nationwide coverage is not possible due to these conditions. It is also less cost and resource intensive. Two companies mentioned the importance of offering service, as their clients demand, as a reason for further working with partners.

Besides comments regarding the market entry specifically for Mexico and the USA, four interviewees made general comments. A company stated that the decisions are not made in Mexico, but rather in the headquarters, for example in the USA. The interviewed client also confirmed this, as they said that even though the application process starts in the specific country, the final decision is with them. A recommendation by Advantage Austria was to start off with developing partners in the same industry in their home market, as well as identifying the situation of the competition. The consulting agency suggested beginning with a network, which is active in both countries and relates to the automotive industry.

3.2.2 Market development, opportunities and risks

For the markets, the sub-categories were divided into the following: market development, future market development, market opportunities and market risks. As mentioned before, those sub-categories were assigned either to Mexico or the USA. For the market development, participants were asked to consider a time frame of five years. Overall, 73 statements regarding the main category were observed.

With reference to the past development of Mexico, seven interview partners gave an answer. Overall comments were rather positive. Interviewees rated the development either with a 'good' or 'very good'. In addition, four mentioned the strong growth and development of the automotive market in the country. All of those seven interviewees made comments regarding the future development as well. Opinions were more moderate in this regard. However, no negative forecast was given. All participants made comments regarding the current political situation in the USA affecting Mexico and related it with President Trump. However, five out of seven were optimistic that despite the current

situation growth will continue and a positive development can be perceived. In general, the past development was rated in a very positive manner and the interviewees would predict the same for the future, but the political situation is a factor of uncertainty for them and hence, forecasts were rather cautious.

In regard to the past market development in the USA, the six participants made one specific relevant comment. Five stated that the USA had a good or even very good development over the past five years. Only one was moderate and stated that the market is lagging a bit behind, but rather in regards of new technologies. Four participants mentioned the crisis from 2008 and its consequences. However, it was argued that despite the former crisis during the last years, the market has developed well. The same interviewees also made comments regarding the future development of the US market. All comments were relatively positive and a good development was predicted. Three participants mentioned the political situation and Mister Trump as a negative factor influencing their evaluation for the future development. However, overall forecasts were good and if the political factor would be left out, even great.

Besides the market development, interviewees were asked to rate market opportunities and risks in the Mexican and US market, especially regarding high quality and technology products with an elevated price. For market opportunities in the Mexican market, four participants were vocal on the topic. Opinions differed a lot in this regards and varied from there being many opportunities to almost none. Arguments for the latter were that Mexicans prefer to have less automation, as it is less expensive to pay the workers and that due to a different level of education processes have to be made easier. Reasons mentioned for good opportunities in the Mexican market were that companies demand the same quality in all of their subsidiaries over the world and if a product is of good quality, price is not that decisive. Three participants mentioned market risks. Among others, the degree of education is not as high as in Austria, cultural factors such as time issues, as well as the language difference, the difficulty of finding an adequate agent, and issues with employee retention.

For market opportunities in the USA, seven interviewees made a comment. Overall, comments were mainly positive and at least a moderate degree of opportunities was detected. Two participants mentioned that at the moment a rethinking is taking place and higher quality is more demanded than before. Two companies stated the size and the potential of the US market as well, as they consider it to be one of the biggest worldwide. For market risks, two interviewees made a specific comment for the USA, both related to price and that the country is price-sensitive. The interviewed client also confirmed this argument, as they said that costs in general have a great decision power for them.

3.2.3 Culture and sales person characteristics

Participants were asked if cultural factors play a role when exporting to Mexico or the USA. Many comments were made about the characteristics for an optimal sales person through which a subcategory was designed. In total, 36 statements were found.

Five interviewees commented on Mexican culture. Three out of five mentioned the importance of personal contact and relationships. Additionally, each time the following factors appeared: knowing the language, the different time perception, and creating commitment. Regarding the US culture, four interviewees commented. Three times the personal contact with the welcoming and more informal culture was mentioned. Two

times that everything has to be done faster, related to ‘time is money’ and that a direct, fast way is preferred.

In addition to cultural comments, the sales person’s quality was mentioned and often a cultural context was highlighted, which is the reason that the sub-category was assigned to culture. Regarding sales person acceptance in general, this was further discussed later on. Overall, five interviewees made relevant comments for this sub-category. Four mentioned that a sales person is required to know the local circumstances and the culture. The automotive and technological know-how was mentioned twice. One participant highlighted the fact, that a sales agent must know the product and not do catalogue selling, but to be really specific. For Mexico specifically, the issue that no ‘agent-culture’ exists as it is known in Europe was mentioned and subsequently, it is difficult to find an appropriate agent with the cultural and technical know-how.

3.2.4 Sales strategy

The main category sales strategy for the coding was divided into Mexico, USA, and general (including resources). Interviewees were asked on how they would describe an optimum sales strategy for the two markets. Thirty six statements were found to be relevant for this category.

For the sales strategy in Mexico, four interviewees made comments. All of them mentioned that decisions often are not taken in Mexico itself, but rather in the headquarters in the USA or Europe. Additionally, one participant argued that in Mexico on the one hand, a local person is needed. However, on the other hand, it is well seen if someone from the headquarters is in contact with them and that this should be considered especially for main customers.

Seven interviewees commented on the sales strategy in the USA. Each time three of them mentioned the importance of service availability and to be with a subsidiary in the country. In regard to service, it was highlighted that a 24/7 availability is desired and fast response times are needed. It was argued that a company should ideally be in the market with their own employees and not only with partners. Twice, issues related to price, fast response times, and technology were mentioned. When it came to price one interview partner and the client said that it is a strong decision criterion. Fast response times were said to be required from US clients and that it is important to have a contact, which is available 24/7. For technology, on the one hand, it was stated that high technology is interesting for US-Americans as well, but not as much as for Europeans. On the other hand, interviewees argued that in the USA it is preferred to have standardised equipment, which can be bought and delivered right away. Therefore, the responding company even adapted their product towards having less automation.

The client, Advantage Austria, and one company made general comments on the sales strategy. They stated that even though they have a decision matrix where points for certain criteria are distributed to the competitors, cost is rated high. Additionally, know-how and having two or more employees locally available, the reliability of the equipment, response times and a special advantage, which distinguishes the company from competitors, are highly valued. The client highlighted the fact that if old equipment can be refurbished with fewer costs than acquiring a new one. However, flexible standard equipment, which can be adapted for different production lines and shifted to another location, is preferable. Advantage Austria recommends reviewing the marketing material and identifying the USPs of the product. The company stated that they do not really use

promotion, but mainly rely on references or search for the preferred clients themselves. One company and Advantage Austria mentioned employee retention as a crucial issue.

3.2.5 *After-sales-service*

Service-orientation of the customers was often referred to, as already described in some aspects beforehand. This category was once again divided into Mexico, USA, and general. Overall, 15 relevant statements were highlighted. Interviewees were asked, which factors regarding after-sales-service they consider as important.

Specifically, for the after-sales-service in Mexico, one interviewee argued that in general finding persons who are able to provide the required service are difficult to find and, as everywhere, an efficient service is demanded.

For the USA, six interviewees made relevant comments. Five of them mentioned the importance of a fast and efficient service relating to fast response times in service and spare parts availability. Four interviewees specifically determined the required know-how and availability of skilled workers to provide the after-sales-service.

The general comments made by two participants, relate to the same issues. Independent were the equipment is located, service availability is demanded due to high costs produced during down times.

3.2.6 *Location*

The interviewees provided information regarding preferred locations and they were asked for reasons why they have decided for the markets. If they would decide equally from a current point of view was also mentioned. One sub-category for Mexico and one for the USA was created. In total, 36 statements relating to location were marked.

Six interviewees made relevant comments regarding the location in Mexico. Two of them are located in Querétaro, one said that they are located in the North of the country and the client has its location in Saltillo. Additionally, Advantage Austria and one company stated important locations for an automotive supplier. The former mentioned relevant locations, such as the Bajío Region, including San Luis Potosí, Guanajuato, Queretaro and Mexico City, and the region around Puebla and Tlaxcala. The company highlighted the North, Northwest, and Central regions.

Nine interviewees responded to the location in the USA. Seven of those were companies and except of one all are located in Michigan, close to Detroit. Only one company is located in Wisconsin. Besides the southern states, the consulting company due to bonus-systems existing there mentioned Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, and Alabama. As a main reason for the locations, the size of the market was mentioned and that all of the OEMs and automotive decision makers are located there, which are their clients.

3.2.7 *Combination of the markets*

Interviewees were asked which advantages and risks they perceive if during a market entry in Mexico the US market is handled as well. The category was divided into advantages, risks, and general statements. Overall, 34 relevant comments were perceived.

Five respondents commented on advantages for a combined market entry. However, almost no overlapping answers were found. Twice it was mentioned that decisions

usually are made just in one country. One interviewee therefore suggested combining key account management. Further advantages that were mentioned are as follows: overlapping in the engineering centres, the geographic proximity, a synergetic effect due to the possibility of coordination, and that both economies are interwoven.

Six respondents made relevant comments regarding risks. The risk of underestimating the investment and the challenges of a market entry were mentioned three times. Additionally, identified risks by the interviewees were; security and corruption issues, political instability, management of service availability, to find the accurate person, and the different mentality and culture.

Ten interviewees made general comments regarding a combined market entry. Four of them argued that the markets are totally separated for them and that it rather is a parallel, independent process. Two mentioned that it should be either the other way around, starting off in the USA and afterwards entering Mexico. It was mentioned twice that companies often do not possess the necessary resources for entering two markets at a time. Another comment was that if the necessary network exists, it might be possible to enter both markets at the same time.

3.2.8 Sales/service person acceptance

Interviewees were asked whether that an US-American would accept a Mexican service person, as they would do with a compatriot. However, many answered the question the other way around and therefore, two sub-categories were created. Overall, 17 comments were made regarding this issue.

Seven interviewees made a relevant comment on whether a Mexican service or sales person would be accepted in the USA. All comments were either moderate or negative. Two said definitely no and that they could not imagine it at all. One argued with a strong no, but did not exclude it completely. Four of the interviewees were quite undecided, but under certain circumstances they could imagine having a Mexican sales or service person for the USA. Those circumstances include legal issues, twice geographical issues were mentioned, and if the person has the technical and cultural knowledge. Regarding geography, one interviewee argued that in New York and California he would not see any problems; however, in Central USA he does.

Four participants also answered the question if a US sales or service person would be accepted in Mexico. Overall, comments were moderate, but rather negative. One argued that a Mexican would accept an US-American and also have faith in his technical knowledge. However, it would not be satisfying and additionally, it would be difficult to find an American going there. Other comments were in regard to the moment the relation is not the best and that a local person is needed or that the US-American would need somehow a relation with Mexico. Next chapter presents discussion of the results with answers to the research questions.

4 Discussion

Developing a strategy for increased international activity has proven to be a key factor of success for SMEs. In the process, plenty of factors influence, and therefore, research question one are concerned with the specific factors influencing the expansion strategy of GST with a sales agent in Mexico and the USA. As such factors were identified company

internal, industry and market specific, cultural, as well as market entry choice and internationalisation factors. The entirety of alternative assumptions is accepted based on the results found in the research. GST can be defined as a SME with a technological direction in the automotive industry. Their will to internationalise is assumed as a reasonable consequence by literature. Being adaptable and innovative provides them advantages to overcome their limited resources. If GST is able to develop a strong management and leadership position in its niche market and invests their resources adequately, issues may be overcome. Their specific products, technical know-how and excellent service are a pre-requisite for their expansion strategy to Mexico and the US.

Both markets have proven to be relevant for the automotive industry and have a high concentration of OEMs, as well as automotive suppliers. This statement is confirmed by empirical study and by interviews. However, automation and technological advancements are not as relevant and accepted as in Europe. Often decisions for the Mexican market are taken in the US or Europe and being locally in the US turned out to be considered as more relevant than in Mexico. If both markets are compared, the automotive industry in terms of production and sales is larger in the US what has again been confirmed by empirical study and by interviews. In any case, industry and market specific factors must be considered and evaluated beforehand by GST in order to successfully introduce their products in those markets. The Mexican culture seems to differ more from Austria than the US does.

Mexico is a more hierarchical, centralised and collectivistic society compared to the other two countries. One interviewee, who highlighted that Mexicans like to see people from the headquarters, as they award them higher competency, confirmed this. For Mexicans, personal contact is extremely relevant, as the country has a collectivistic society. In the interviews, this was mentioned quite often, which confirms the importance of personal relationships for them. This is also important in order to create commitment of Mexicans. Austria and Mexico are both masculine countries, where people are seeking for success and competition. However, a Mexican would not be as direct as an Austrian. Both countries try to avoid uncertainties and rely on well-known behaviour. Mexico has a short-term orientation and is indulgent, which may explain the different time perception. The interviewees argued that patience and time is needed. Nevertheless, spontaneous meetings and unforeseeable changes are accepted (Hofstede et al., 2010).

The US is a non-hierarchical, individualistic country and therefore, self-responsibility is expected and counterparts are likely to be approached in negotiations. This directly relates to the informal and direct culture mentioned by the respondents. They are seeking success and competition, as well as are considered highly innovative, which relates to the comments of the interviewees that 'time is money'. Their fast and direct way also relates with their short-term orientation, as US-Americans are looking for quick results. However, they are an indulgent country, which was confirmed by the respondents, as they were said to be a welcoming country where personal contact is honoured. Short-term orientation and indulgence explain why leisure time activities such as playing golf or having dinner were said by the interviewees to be much more involved in business life than in Austria (Hofstede et al., 2010).

However, in literature, and the empirical study it turned out that the cultural influence should not be underestimated. Adapting to those circumstances and understanding cultural differences is a pre-requisite for a successful expansion strategy in any country. Nevertheless, the culture of distant countries requires a greater effort.

The market entry choice and internationalisation factors have an influence on expansion strategy as well. Depending on circumstances and the availability of resources, the market entry choice should be made. Entering the targeted markets with a sales agent seems to be an adequate option based on the findings in the literature review, the empirical study and the case studies. Notwithstanding, depending on the country a certain market entry strategy may be more or less common and as such, searching for an agent may take longer, as for example argued for Mexico. Choosing the right entry mode and the implementation will influence the strategy. In regards of considering a latter change to a sales subsidiary, contracts should be placed in order to avoid high payments to the agent afterwards. Here again, interviews confirmed the empirical study.

Besides factors influencing strategy, operational measures may increase the success rate of GST's internationalisation to Mexico and the US. During the literature review certain factors were identified, which are establishing a stable network and strategic partnerships, gather market knowledge, the degree of innovation, the availability and usage of resources, location factors, the sales process, and the after-sales service. All of the alternative assumptions are accepted for the second research question partly. A stable network and strategic partnerships has proven to be one of the major success factors for SME internationalisation. The factor is highlighted in most of the literature to some degree and is highly integrated in more recent approaches as well. GST should focus on establishing partnerships in Austria, as well as in their targeted markets. On the one hand, relationships with existing customers, suppliers, and partners may be strengthening, but on the other hand, becoming part of an automotive cluster and with supplementing companies may be an option.

Market knowledge is considered as a pre-requisite for successfully entering a market. Through gathering information about the market and cooperating with persons well versed with the local circumstances, GST may be able to avoid wasting resources and develop a comparative advantage. The assumption regarding the degree of innovation as a factor may be partly confirmed. Some indications in literature and interviews exist, but it seems to depend a lot on the company itself how much innovation is required. Nevertheless, having a product differing from competitors may help to a leading position, as especially SMEs convince their customers with innovative solutions. GST may focus on further developing its innovative products. Yet, other factors should be kept in mind as well. The availability and usage of resources was found to be a decisive factor regarding SME internationalisation. A lack of those is often perceived as a main reason for failure. Moreover, GST should identify its major resources and their return on investment. A profound analysis and prioritisation may help to utilise resources more precisely and avoid a waste of those. Additionally, combined with a market analysis and considering planned expenses, the market entry and strategy may be prepared more carefully.

Location factors are another important point and its locations should be identified conscientiously. Psychologically, close countries and with a high market potential are the most recommendable markets for GST. As such, overcoming cultural differences and reaching the target group is easier, as well as generating a greater market share. The sales process and the person hired for it are crucial in the development of the company in foreign markets as well. On the one hand, for the sales process market and culture specific knowledge is required. Yet on the other hand, in case of highly specialised products, such as those of GST, technical know-how and explaining benefits obtained to customers is decisive.

As common for manufacturing companies, GST opts for outsourcing its sales in the targeted markets. A focus should be put on the mentioned factors and the sales person evaluated accordingly. Additionally, combining an external representative with a direct sales force is recommendable. Issues such as company specific knowledge and having a certain control over the representatives are overcome more easily. As in markets, such as the US, a physical presence of the company is demanded and the market potential is high, having partly a direct sales force may lead to an increased order situation and a better market position. Besides the sales process, the after-sales-service plays an important role in the industry. Especially in niche markets and high technology companies, fast response times and flexibility are inevitable. If a service is outsourced or not, GST must assure an impeccable service with fast response times, spare parts availability, and high quality standards. In the US, even a 24/7 service contact availability is required and the provider is expected to react immediately. If an external person is responsible for service, GST must be totally sure that those quality standards can be complied with, as otherwise the reputation of the company itself will suffer extremely.

The third research question is concerned with whether a combined market entry and strategy formulation with a sales agent to Mexico and the USA is advisable for GST. The alternative assumption must be rejected in this case. Many SMEs face issues regarding availability of resources and enter two markets at a time, which becomes cost and time intensive. Therefore, it may be more recommendable to start off in one market. The US market is bigger and, based on the recommendations of the empirical study as well as interviews, it may be advisable for GST to start in the US and later on continue in Mexico. It was argued that often decisions are rather made in the US or in Europe than in Mexico. As such, to establish a network with decision-making forces in the US in a first step, may consecutively lead to further orders in Mexico. In any case, the sales person for each country should be familiar with the local circumstances and a connection must be given. Therefore, rather seeing both processes, as parallel and independent may be more adequate.

5 Conclusions

Formerly reserved for large companies, globalisation leads to increasing importance of internationalisation for SMEs as well. Especially in the manufacturing sector and for high-technology companies, this is the case. As such, it seems reasonable that GST, as a SME in the automotive sector, expands its business operations to further countries. In the Mexican and the US markets, the automotive industry has a high significance for their economies and most of the big players are represented. Following, internationalisation of GST to those countries may be favoured for the future business development of the country.

Regarding future outlook, the automotive industry still is a growth market and especially Mexico and the USA seem to be attractive to suppliers. Due to the NAFTA agreement the manufacturing sector is flourishing in Mexico and most of the well-known OEMs and tier-1 suppliers are represented in the country. Clusters have been formed and the automotive industry is one of the economic drivers of Mexico. This development is not likely to decline and for the upcoming years further records in production and sales are predicted. The US is the second largest automotive producer worldwide and its potential is still growing. In the auto alley around Detroit a huge cluster has developed

with representatives of all important companies of the industry. However, the current political situation will influence the future progress. Many experts are concerned with the legislative term of President Donald Trump and the NAFTA agreement might be renegotiated as well. The developments in the USA will strongly influence the Mexican economic and political situation, due to the high attachment of the countries. Mexico is advised to diversify its exports and economy in order to become more independent from the US. In 2018, presidential elections will take place as well in Mexico and issues such as corruption and education must be tackled by the politics. GDP growth is forecasted to be rather moderate this year, but climbing up to 2.7% for the following years.

The future of the US is likely to be influenced by how the president will implement his protectionist politics. Nevertheless, the automotive industry boom is predicted to continue and not expected to decline over the next years. GDP growth is estimated to be about 2% each year until 2020. Those future estimates were corroborated as well by the interviewees in the empirical study. Despite being concerned about the political development, respondents predict growth and a good development for the next five years for both countries. Many opportunities for automotive suppliers can be identified in both countries and are likely to persist over the next years as well. Therefore, establishing business relationships in Mexico and the US may be a thoughtful decision and investment in the future for GST.

Empirical analysis showed that some hypotheses were accepted and some rejected. Authors accepted hypothesis about correlation between variables in US and rejected correlation between variables in Mexico.

With the empirical analysis authors answer all three research questions. Expansion strategy with a sales agent in the USA and Mexico is influenced by: company internal factors, industry and market specific factors, the culture of the focal company and the targeted markets, the market entry choice and internationalisation factors. For the second research question all of the alternative assumptions were accepted partly. A stable network and strategic partnerships has proven to be one of the major success factors for SME internationalisation. Market knowledge is considered as a pre-requisite for successfully entering a market. The assumption regarding the degree of innovation as a factor may be partly confirmed, while location factors are another important point and its locations should be identified conscientiously. The sales process is also crucial in the development of the company in foreign markets as well. Besides the sales process, also the after-sales-service plays an important role in the industry. The third research question was concerned with whether a combined market entry and strategy formulation with a sales agent to Mexico and the USA is advisable for GST. As many SMEs face issues regarding availability of resources and enter two markets at a time, which becomes cost and time intensive, it may be more recommendable to start off in one market.

Despite conscientious research, the scope of this paper is not complete and certain limitations are accounted for. The information regarding the company was provided by GST. However, it cannot be guaranteed that this paper will offer a complete analysis of the given topics due to the authors not being a part of the company and without any direct access to all information. Additionally, this paper examines two different markets and their compatibility. Resulting from the extensive information a market analysis is comprised of, this only allows the authors to focus on the automotive industry and a limited size of factors. This is why, no complete market analysis can be achieved, but it is focused on achieving effective insights into the two provided markets.

The selected methodology was based on the scope of the paper, as well as on how information could be gathered, which led to the decision to apply a mixed methods approach. Literature review and expert interviews were chosen as main methods due to its qualitative nature and suitability for this topic. Interviews with experts of the given field took place. The selection of how many relevant experts would be interviewed was limited. In-depth information is required for this paper, which can be problematic when conducting this kind of in a study. The interviews conducted for this paper is limited and no pre-test was conducted due to a small size of the population.

It must be stated that only a limited amount of data and statistical methods were used in order to gather representative results. An additional study would be necessary to expand upon this research effectively. Nevertheless, valuable information that may be helpful was withdrawn. To describe the relevant results, a selection of theories and factors had to be made clear in advance. The authors based their decision on the extensive research of literature, as well as the conducted interviews. The author strived to achieve an objective research result, but a certain bias cannot be excluded completely. For further research regarding the topic it may be interesting to examine the suitability of different entry modes for the automotive supplier industry. For GST it might be recommendable to do additional market research and further develop their strategy.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire for companies

Vorausgehende fragen:

- Haben sie eine vertriebs – und servicestruktur* in Mexiko oder den USA?
- Bearbeiten sie den US-markt von einer vertriebs – und servicestruktur in Mexiko aus?
 - Oder haben sie es früher so gehandhabt?
 - Oder haben sie es je in erwägung gezogen?

*Vertriebs – und servicestruktur bezieht sich darauf, entweder eine selbstständige niederlassung in dem jeweiligen land zu haben oder eine verkaufsvertretung, welche die firma dort repräsentiert

Bitte beachten sie, dass es nicht notwendig ist alle fragen zu beantworten. Wenn zumindest eine der vorab gestellten fragen mit ja beantwortet werden kann, fahren sie bitte mit den folgenden fort:

- 1 Strategische entscheidungen
 - 1.1 Welche markteintrittsstrategie haben sie für den mexikanischen/US markt gewählt?
 - 1.2 Wieso haben sie diese art des markteintrittes/diese rechtsform gewählt?
 - 1.3 Welche waren die entscheidenden schritte als sie in den mexikanischen markt eingetreten sind?
 - 1.4 Welche waren die entscheidenden schritte als sie in den US markt eingetreten sind?

- 1.5 Falls zutreffend: welche waren die entscheidenden schritte, als sie in den US markt von Mexiko aus eingetreten sind?
- 1.6 Falls zutreffend: war die strategische entscheidung in Mexiko mit einer vertriebs – und servicestruktur zu beginnen und danach von dort aus den US markt zu bearbeiten erfolgreich?

-
- 1 Sehr erfolgreich
 - 2 Erfolgreich
 - 3 Mäßig erfolgreich
 - 4 Nicht erfolgreich
-

- 1.7 Einflussfaktoren auf die strategiefindung für Mexiko:
 - 1.7.1 Wie würden sie eine optimale verkaufsstrategie für den mexikanischen markt beschreiben?
 - 1.7.2 Welche faktoren sind auf die kultur bezogen entscheidend für einen verkaufsabschluss in Mexiko?
 - 1.7.3 Welche faktoren sind auf die dienstleistung des after-sales-service bezogen wichtig für den mexikanischen markt?
- 1.8 Einflussfaktoren auf die strategiefindung für den US markt:
 - 1.8.1 Wie würden sie eine optimale verkaufsstrategie für den US Markt beschreiben?
 - 1.8.2 Welche faktoren sind auf die kultur bezogen entscheidend für einen verkaufsabschluss in den USA?
 - 1.8.3 Welche Faktoren sind auf die dienstleistung des after-sales-service bezogen wichtig für den US markt?
- 1.9 Halten sie es für eine geeignete option in den US markt zu investieren, wenn die kapazitäten in Mexiko erschöpft sind?

-
- 1 Sehr geeignet
 - 2 Gut geeignet
 - 3 Mäßig geeignet
 - 4 Nicht geeignet
 - 5 Überhaupt nicht geeignet
-

2 Opportunitäten:

- 2.1 Produktopportunitäten in Mexiko:
 - 2.1.1 Ein automobilmaschinenzulieferer bietet produkte mit höherer leistung und genauigkeit an, jedoch sind die maschinen dadurch auch teurer. Wie schätzen sie die chancen für den verkauf im mexikanischen markt verglichen mit anderen Produkten ohne diese charakteristiken ein?

-
- 1 Sehr viele Möglichkeiten
 - 2 Mäßig viele Möglichkeiten
 - 3 Kaum Möglichkeiten
 - 4 Wenig bis keine Möglichkeiten
-

2.1.2 Glauben sie, dass mexikanische kunden bedarf an dieser art der entwickelten technologie haben und dadurch auch gewillt sind höhere preise zu bezahlen?

2.2 Produktopportunitäten in den USA:

2.2.1 Ein automobilmaschinenzulieferer bietet produkte mit höherer leistung und genauigkeit an, jedoch sind die maschinen dadurch auch teurer. Wie schätzen sie die chancen für den verkauf am US-markt verglichen mit anderen produkten ohne diese charakteristiken ein?

-
- 1 Sehr viele möglichkeiten
 - 2 Mäßig viele möglichkeiten
 - 3 Kaum möglichkeiten
 - 4 Wenig bis keine möglichkeiten
-

2.2.2 Glauben sie, dass US-kunden bedarf an dieser art der entwickelten technologie haben und dadurch auch gewillt sind höhere preise zu bezahlen?

2.3 Marktentwicklung in Mexiko:

2.3.1 Wie hat sich der mexikanische automobilmarkt ihrer meinung nach in den letzten 5 jahren entwickelt?

-
- 1 Sehr gut
 - 2 Gut
 - 3 Mittelmäßig gut
 - 4 Nicht sehr gut
 - 5 Überhaupt nicht gut
-

2.3.2 Wie wird sich der mexikanische automobilmarkt ihrer meinung nach in den nächsten 5 jahren entwickeln?

-
- 1 Sehr gut
 - 2 Gut
 - 3 Mittelmäßig gut
 - 4 Nicht sehr gut
 - 5 Überhaupt nicht gut
-

2.4 Marktentwicklung in den USA:

2.4.1 Wie hat sich der US-automobilmarkt ihrer meinung nach in den letzten 5 jahren entwickelt?

-
- 1 Sehr gut
 - 2 Gut
 - 3 Mittelmäßig gut
 - 4 Nicht sehr gut
 - 5 Überhaupt nicht gut
-

2.4.2 Wie wird sich der US-automobilmarkt ihrer meinung nach in den nächsten 5 jahren entwickeln?

-
- 1 Sehr gut
 - 2 Gut
 - 3 Mittelmäßig gut
 - 4 Nicht sehr gut
 - 5 Überhaupt nicht gut
-

3 Vorteile und risiken:

- 3.1 Welche vorteile sehen sie während des markteintrittes in mexiko gleichzeitig den US-markt zu bedienen?
- 3.2 Welche risiken sehen sie während des markteintrittes in Mexiko gleichzeitig den US-markt zu bedienen?
- 3.3 Glauben sie im allgemeinen, dass US-Amerikaner eine mexikanische serviceperson so akzeptieren und anerkennen würden wie einen landsmann?

-
- 1 Definitiv
 - 2 Vermutlich
 - 3 Unentschlossen
 - 4 Vermutlich nicht
 - 5 Definitiv nicht
-

3.4 Wie empfinden sie im allgemeinen die risiken verglichen mit den vorteilen in bezug auf einen markteintritt in die USA von mexiko aus?

-
- 1 Weit mehr Vorteile als Risiken
 - 2 Mehr Vorteile als Risiken
 - 3 Vorteile und Risiken sind ausgewogen
 - 4 Mehr Risiken als Vorteile
 - 5 Weit mehr Risiken als Vorteile
-

4 Standort:

4.1 Standortentscheidung in Mexiko:

- 4.1.1 Für welche region und weshalb haben sie sich für diese lokalität entschieden, um sich in Mexiko zu etablieren?
- 4.1.2 Würden sie sich aus heutiger sicht anderweitig entscheiden?

-
- 1 Definitiv
 - 2 Vermutlich
 - 3 Unentschlossen
 - 4 Vermutlich nicht
 - 5 Definitiv nicht
-

Anmerkungen dazu, weshalb sie sich anders entscheiden würden oder nicht:

4.2 Standortentscheidung in den USA:

4.2.1 Für welche region und weshalb haben sie sich für diese lokalität entschieden, um sich in den USA zu etablieren?

4.2.2 Würden sie sich aus heutiger sicht anderweitig entscheiden?

-
- 1 Definitiv
 - 2 Vermutlich
 - 3 Unentschlossen
 - 4 Vermutlich nicht
 - 5 Definitiv nicht
-

Anmerkungen dazu, weshalb sie sich anders entscheiden würden oder nicht:

Appendix 2

Figure A1 Categories for content analysis (see online version for colours)



Figure A1 Categories for content analysis (see online version for colours) (continued)

- ▲ 🏠 Main categories
 - ▲ 📁 After Sales-Service
 - 👉 C3: After-Sales Service USA
 - 👉 C6: After-Sales Service Mexico
 - 👉 C9: After-Sales Service General
 - ▲ 📁 Location
 - 👉 C4: Location Mexico
 - 👉 C5: Location USA
 - ▲ 📁 Resources
 - 👉 C7: Resources Mexico
 - ▲ 📁 Sales Strategy
 - 👉 C1: Sales Strategy Mexico
 - 👉 C2: Sales Strategy USA
 - 👉 C8: Sales Strategy General

- ▲ 🏠 Main categories
 - ▲ 📁 Combination of Markets
 - 👉 D1: Combination Mexico & USA
 - 👉 D2: Advantages Combination
 - 👉 D3: Risks Combination
 - ▲ 📁 Sales Person Acceptance
 - 👉 D4: Sales Person Acceptance American Mexico
 - 👉 D5: Sales Person Acceptance Mexican USA