

## Understanding corporate B2B web sites' effectiveness from North American and European perspective

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### Abstract

The globalization of economic activities has led multinational business-to-business (B2B) firms to use their corporate web sites extensively to communicate with their stakeholders. Using a field study of 368 business customers, this paper examines three factors of information that influence corporate web sites' effectiveness in a B2B context and whether these factors differ by web site user's national origin. Results indicate that informativeness of a corporate web site is important for both North American and European visitors. Quality of information is important for European users but not an important aspect for North American users. Usability is the most important factor for North American users but it is not important for European users. Implications of these results are discussed for managerial practices and further research.

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### 1. Introduction

The globalization of economic activities and widespread availability of Internet access across the world has led multinational firms to use their corporate web sites to communicate extensively with visitors from different parts of the world. However, many companies face the challenge of how to design a corporate web site that will be perceived as effective in a diverse multicultural environment. This manuscript investigates the factors that influence corporate web sites' effectiveness in a business-to-business (B2B) context and whether these factors differ by the web site visitor's nationality (in particular, North America versus Europe).

The Internet allows marketers to communicate with interested customers, prospects, and stakeholders worldwide. A firm's corporate web site often acts as a gateway for visitors to find critical information that shapes their perceptions about the company as a whole as well as the company's offerings. If visitors to a corporate web site do not find helpful and relevant information, they are likely to form a poor perception about the company and may ultimately visit and transact with competitors who provide the necessary information. In a B2B context, the information aspects in a corporate web site become even more important due to the financial risk and the complexity of the exchange process with typical B2B transactions (Peppers & Rogers, 2001). Therefore, this research focuses on the information content of corporate web sites and the aspects of information customers perceive important for corporate web site effectiveness.

While many consulting companies may have conducted extensive empirical research on corporate web site effectiveness, the results from such studies are, unfortunately, not available in the public domain. There are only

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a handful of studies in the academic literature that looked specifically at corporate web site issues (Palmer, 2002; Robbins & Stylianou, 2003). Palmer (2002) used student samples to evaluate corporate web sites from Fortune 1000 companies. His results indicated that web site success is significantly associated with web site download delay, navigation, content, interactivity, and responsiveness. Robbins and Stylianou (2003) content analyzed corporate web sites from companies across the globe and found web site content features to be significantly different across cultural groups. However, in both of the studies mentioned above, the authors did not distinguish between B2B and B2C corporate web sites. In addition, neither study actually measured and tracked business customers' perceptions about corporate web sites. Given the importance of B2B and the web (Berthon, Ewing, Pitt, & Naude, 2003), it is critical to specifically investigate from business customers' perspectives what factors drive the effectiveness of corporate B2B web sites and whether such factors differ between customers from different parts of the world.

The impact of the Internet in international marketing is expected to be much greater for B2B than for B2C (Samiee, 1998). A recent report from eMarketer (<http://www.emarketer.com/>) projects worldwide total e-commerce to grow to \$3.2 trillion in 2004 and be dominated by an online population outside of North America. As per recent statistics, by 2002, 600 million people are online worldwide ([http://www.clickz.com/stats/big\\_picture/geographics/print.php/151151](http://www.clickz.com/stats/big_picture/geographics/print.php/151151)), and the number of European Internet users (190 million) exceeds the number of North American Internet users (183 million). It is common knowledge that there are many underlying differences between how customers in North America perceive marketing stimuli or communication compared to customers in other parts of the world (Lynch & Beck, 2001). However, what is unknown is how such differences in customers' perceptions manifest in influencing corporate B2B web site effectiveness. This research attempts to bridge this gap with a field study of 368 business customers from two different continents—North America and Europe.

The objective of this research is to identify the drivers of a B2B corporate web site's effectiveness and explore whether these drivers are different for business customers from different parts of the world. In the next section, a brief review of relevant prior research is provided, followed by hypotheses about the importance of different dimensions of information in a corporate B2B web site and their relationship to web site effectiveness. This is followed by a discussion of the design of the survey instrument and method of data collection. The results from a survey using a large sample of B2B customers in the construction industry are discussed in the next section. Finally, the implications of the research, its limitations, and future research directions are discussed.

## 2. Literature review and conceptual definitions

A B2B corporate web site is a gateway between a company and its prospects, customers, and other stakeholders. This differs from B2C web sites in that the prospects and customers are other businesses rather than end consumers. The goal of this research is to understand the effects of prospects' and customers' perceptions about different dimensions of information on a B2B firm's corporate web site's effectiveness. In considering the perceptions of prospects and customers of a B2B web site, this paper emphasizes broader perceptual constructs (such as information quality, usability, etc.) rather than very specific web site design features (such as exact color combinations, font size, etc.). Consequently, the literature review ignores academic and popular press literature that has focused on very specific web site design features. Instead, the conceptual model is built by drawing upon literature that proposes relationships among broader perceptual constructs as shown in Fig. 1. Each of the three perceptual constructs in Fig. 1 has been identified by prior researchers as antecedents that influence web site effectiveness as discussed next.

### 2.1. Dimensions of information in a corporate B2B web site

A B2B firm's corporate web site is typically used to provide general information about the company, trade or application-specific information and news, and product information (Robbins & Stylianou, 2003). Most multinational firms provide links from their corporate web sites to their country-specific web sites where the company operates. Often, the actual commercial transactions (involving order-placement, payment, tracking of shipment, etc.) are carried out in those country-specific web sites because of the idiosyncratic nature of the business environment (laws and regulations, taxes, etc.) in each country and varying company policies (with regard to pricing, packaging, delivery, etc.) in different countries. Thus, the effectiveness of a B2B firm's corporate web site may be more dependent on the ability of the web site to provide relevant information to generate enough interest to convert a visitor into a customer or partner. In this manuscript, three dimensions of information (informativeness, usability of information, and quality of information) in a corporate B2B web site are considered. These dimensions of information were selected based on prior research, content analysis of corporate web sites, and expert opinions as described next.

#### 2.1.1. Informativeness

Marketing practitioners and academic researchers contend that one of the primary purposes of a company's web site (corporate or country-specific) is to provide information to prospects, customers, and other stakeholders (Chen, Clifford, & Wells, 2002; Eighmey, 1997;

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