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Should tweets differ for B2B and B2C? An analysis of Fortune 500 companies' Twitter communications

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ABSTRACT

Business-to-business (B2B) marketers hesitate to embrace social media as a marketing tool, unlike their business-to-consumer (B2C) counterparts, and they struggle to implement successful social media strategies due to their limited understanding of the phenomenon. Drawing on communication and word-of-mouth theories, the authors investigate how marketers use Twitter differently across contexts and predict key factors likely to influence the message strategies used in each. A longitudinal content analysis and logistic regression support the assessment of a sample of more than 7000 tweets by *Fortune* 500 companies. Marketers in B2B and B2C settings exhibit significant differences in their branding and selling strategies; their use of message appeals; and the use of cues, links, and hashtags to support information searches. Whereas B2B marketers tend to use more emotional than functional appeals in their tweets, neither B2C nor B2B marketers have adopted "hard sell" message strategies.

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1. Introduction

The potential of social media as a marketing tool is undeniable. Yet social media research and stories of its effectiveness mainly focus on business-to-consumer (B2C) examples in which social media leads to increased brand awareness, loyalty, engagement, and sales (e.g., Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012; Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, & Hughes, 2013; Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton, 2011; Wiersema, 2013). Before social media marketing can be deemed an unqualified success though, marketers need to better understand its role in business-to-business (B2B) settings; thus far, B2B marketers seem hesitant to adopt social media marketing strategies. According to one study, only 5% of B2B marketers cite social media marketing as a well-optimized part of their marketing mix, 17% do not use social media at all, and 58% consider themselves in the initial stages of developing their social media strategies (Giamanco & Gregoire, 2012). Similarly, 37% of marketers claim that they do not know enough about social media sites to know where to begin (Emarketer, 2010). Marketing academics offer little guidance, because they have been slow to pursue research on social media phenomena in B2B settings (Wiersema, 2013). The few available studies tend to be descriptive and generally support findings from practitioner studies. For example, Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides (2011) find that just more than 25% of B2B firms use social media to achieve their brand objectives and that non-users believe it is not important or do not understand whether or how it might help their brands.

Social media tools have been lauded for their ability to enhance collaboration, encourage content sharing, and build community (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009; Michaelidou et al., 2011). Consumers and businesses increasingly adopt social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Twitter as a result (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Yang, 2012; Zaglia, 2013); Twitter is one of the most widely used social media sites among *Fortune* 500 companies, such that approximately 73% of them use it to communicate with followers (Barnes, Leschault, & Andonian, 2012). This micro-blogging service allows marketers to send "tweets" (i.e., text that is 140 characters or less with possible hyperlinks and attached photos) to a network of associates (followers) at any point in time through a myriad of electronic devices (Twitter, 2013a). Its user base has grown exponentially since its inception, attracting the attention of marketers who are interested in interacting closely with their clientele. By tweeting their followers, marketers have an opportunity to increase brand awareness, generate leads and revenues, foster relationships, and create brand loyalty (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012; Rapp et al., 2013).

Many B2C companies already have used Twitter to their advantage (Twitter, 2013c), but fewer success stories include B2B companies. In

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addition, both practitioner and academic research on micro-blogging websites are relatively scant (e.g., Michaelidou et al., 2011; Ramos, 2008, 2009; Spekman & Dotson, 2009), such that B2B marketers appear uncertain about how to take advantage of Twitter and similar sites. Ramos (2009) notes that only 8% of B2B marketers using social media find it highly effective in driving brand awareness, and only 5% consider it effective for generating leads. Yet the rapid growth of and significant investments in social media create the need for academics to explore and explicate methods for capitalizing on social media, across both consumer and business contexts. Without such guidance, B2B practitioners may mistakenly assume that mimicking their B2C counterparts will prove similarly rewarding. However, evidence suggests that the two contexts differ enough to justify dedicated investigations and distinct approaches.

The objective of this article is to explore whether B2B marketers should adopt distinct Twitter message strategies. Considering the conceptual distinctions of business and consumer markets, we investigate how marketers use Twitter differently across these contexts, in an effort to explicate relevant social media phenomena. We use communication and word-of-mouth (WOM) theories to advance understanding of the flow and process of communication in social media contexts. Furthermore, we contribute to B2B advertising and organizational buying literature by providing theoretical explanations and empirical support for the differences in tweeting strategies between B2B and B2C contexts.

We thus begin with a general background of Twitter and its uses for businesses. In discussing communication and WOM theories as a framework for describing the flow and process of communication in social media contexts, we highlight relevant differences between B2B and B2C sectors, in accordance with organizational buying literature. Next, we derive hypotheses from B2B advertising literature, followed by a discussion of our methodology and results. We summarize our findings before highlighting some managerial implications and directions for research.

2. Overview of Twitter

The range of social media sites on the Internet (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google +, LinkedIn, and Pinterest) is vast, and each site has its own unique architecture, culture, and norms that affect how companies use it to execute their social media strategies (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). Social media topics are widespread but incompletely understood, with a variety of challenges and opportunities in both B2B and B2C sectors (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In this research we focus on Twitter, the micro-blogging information network site, which hosts more than 200 million active users who tweet approximately 400 million tweets daily (Twitter, 2013e). To exploit this tremendous user base, companies have begun to create brand-specific accounts and brand communities that can engage with customers (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Approximately 73% of *Fortune* 500 companies use Twitter to connect with customers (Barnes et al., 2012).

Depending on their interests, Twitter users may follow certain business accounts or brand communities and eventually subscribe to company tweets. When a user becomes a follower, all subsequent tweets appear in his or her timeline. Marketers also can follow their users to observe their conversations and even induce two-way communication flows to send direct messages to customers. Twitter thus adopts an asymmetrical follower model, such that businesses do not need to approve their followers, nor do followers need to approve their businesses (Twitter, 2013d). In this sense, Twitter is a highly viable means for marketers to interact with customers interested in their offerings. It also enables them to gather real-time market intelligence, insights, and feedback. Public tweets are available for anyone to read too, whether logged in to Twitter or not. Thus, the option of open and public delivery of communications could benefit marketers who need to spread their messages to a larger audience, beyond followers.

Marketers can share information by sending tweets that might include photos, videos, links, news, and stories. Although a tweet has 140-character limit, unique features available to marketers can organize and share information effectively. Hashtags, a word beginning with the # symbol, can be added to tweets to organize conversations around specific topics and facilitate search. Mentions, or adding a Twitter username, also can be embedded in the tweet to grab a particular follower's attention. Furthermore, tweets can include URLs, which are automatically condensed to 19 characters to conserve space. With recently introduced features, such as expanded tweets, users can employ links to preview content, view images, and play videos. This feature provides more interactive experiences. Cashtags, which begin with the $ symbol, also can be added to allow users to research stocks and company performance.

A user can interact with a tweet by replying, retweeting (i.e., forwarding the message) to friends, or marking it a favorite tweet. A tweet can go viral quickly if followers start engaging by replying, favoring, and retweeting it. In addition, marketers can create buzz on Twitter by promoting their tweets and accounts through various advertising options. Promoted tweets are targeted to reach specific groups at the right time and place; promoted accounts focus on creating more followers and influencers (Twitter, 2013d).

3. Social media communications theory

Most B2B marketers use social media to increase brand loyalty, awareness, and reputation; heighten buyer engagement; foster customer relationships; and increase sales and profitability (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Rapp et al., 2013). One way for marketers to fulfill these objectives is to create brand communities and communicate with audiences through social media sites (Zaglia, 2013). Understanding the flow of communication between businesses and their customers thus is important.

"Communication is the human activity that links people together and creates relationships" (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998, p. 2). In traditional communication models (e.g., Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Lasswell, 1948; Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Stern, 1994), a sender (source) encodes or creates a message, its content (message) gets transmitted through a medium, and the receiver decodes the sender's message. In more interactive communication processes, such as that of the social media environment, the sender and receiver change positions constantly while responding to each other's messages (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008; Labrecque, Zanjani, & Milne, 2011; Mueller, Garg, Nam, Berg, & McDonnell, 2011). That is, a feedback loop sends a receiver's response back to the sender.

In Fig. 1 we depict the flow of communication between marketers and customers in a social media context. Both B2B and B2C marketers encode and send social media messages through social media sites, and customers receive and decode the messages. Marketers must decide which message elements to include in their communications to motivate their audiences to engage with their brand posts. Buyers or consumers receive the messages and must absorb and interpret them; if sufficiently motivated, they also take action, such as continuing the dialogue, sharing the message with their network, storing the message, or making a purchase. Marketers can track and monitor these actions, respond to comments, and continue the dialogue. Because of this response capability, a continuous feedback loop exists.

To help build or create brand identity, meaning, responses, and relationships (Keller, 2009), marketers also vary their communication strategies in their attempt to find those that are likely to motivate audiences to engage with the brand (Keller, 2009; Lovett, Peres, & Shachar, 2013). In addition to selecting appropriate brand strategy approaches and message appeals, they decide whether they should encourage additional information search and employ various selling strategies in social media announcements. The brand strategy approaches and message appeals employed seek to identify the brand with its customers and establish

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