Social media use in B2b sales and its impact on competitive intelligence collection and adaptive selling: Examining the role of learning orientation as an enabler

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Keywords:
Social media
Learning orientation
Adaptive selling
Competitive intelligence
Sales performance

A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the use of social media by business-to-business (B2B) salespeople to assist in their job functions. The authors propose that a salesperson's attitude toward social media usefulness, as well as a salesperson's learning orientation, will influence how much a salesperson uses social media to assist in day-to-day job tasks. Additionally, the impact that the use of social media has on collecting knowledge about competitors, adapting to customers, and sales performance is considered. Accordingly, a broad literature review is provided to introduce extant theory contributing to the proposed model. The practical uses of social media by salespeople will be described, and then the theoretical foundation is built, encompassing social media use, goal orientations, and adaptive selling theory. Results of an empirical model are provided, followed by a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications.

1. Introduction

In the world of business-to-business (B2B) sales, “social selling” is a relatively new idea but an ever-growing opportunity. Social selling is referred to by Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, and Singh (2012) as a professional selling practice that is “predicated on the strength of social media allies within a social enterprise” (p. 341) and by Trainor (2012) as a capability “to use knowledge about customers and the network of customer relationships to effectively navigate the firm’s sales cycle” (p. 324). Social media is associated with different technologies able to provide users with services such as networking, online search, and analytics (O’Reilly & Battelle, 2009). In this paper, we identify the role of social media in B2B sales and examine its impact in the selling process.

For marketers, social media is a promising marketing tool that may complement customer relationship management (CRM) processes and can be used to target specific segments of customers (Heller Baird & Parasnis, 2011). In fact, a 2015 trade study by PeopleLinx found that 73% of the 277 respondents, all of whom were B2B sales and account management professionals, considered social selling to be “valuable.” Increasingly, managers are adding social media as a new element to the traditional promotion mix tools (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Social media can be technically defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media includes social and professional networking sites, social blogs, micro-blogging, podcasts and wikis (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, and Flickr) (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010). From a marketing and sales research perspective, social media is defined as “the technological component of the communication, transaction and relationship building functions of a business which leverages the network of customers and prospects to promote value co-creation” (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2012, p. 308).

In the industrial selling context, buyers are using social media for their purchases as they compare products, research the market, and build relationships with salespeople. Salespeople can use social media in all steps of the selling process, from prospecting to follow-up (Andzulis et al., 2012). Social media channels such as Twitter may be used to prospect or find opportunities, while LinkedIn may assist in identifying names of true decision makers and buyers within an organization. The immediacy and availability of social networks foster relationships that may otherwise be slow to connect, as new contacts are easier to make and participation in industry-specific groups on social
networks reduces the amount of screening that takes place in the formation of more traditional relationships (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). Overall, buyer-seller relationships can be enriched with the two-way communication mode provided by social media.

However, even though salespeople agree that social media is valuable (PeopleLinx, 2015) and there is support for using social media throughout the selling process (Andzulis et al., 2012), a recent study finds that selling organizations are slower to adopt social media than expected (Moncrief, Marshall, & Rudd, 2015). Rather than at an organizational level, social media use in B2B sales is becoming popular at the salesperson level as an individual initiative. It is important to note that, while salespeople may have a private account for their own personal use on social media platforms, the current research focuses on salespeople connecting through social media in a professional context. At this level, use of social media is aimed “to generate content (e.g., blogs, microblogs, wikis) and develop networks (e.g., social networks, online communities)” (Agnihotri et al., 2012, p. 334) for greater interaction with customers and prospects.

The growing acceptance of social media among the sales force has been credited to its potential usefulness for developing and sustaining networks within and outside organizations (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016; Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd, & Lee, 2012; Rapp, Beitzelspacher, Grewal, & Hughes, 2013; Rodriguez, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012). Additionally, social media helps salespeople to prospect across cultures and on an international level (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). For example, salespeople wanting to build their professional network online within the United States (U.S.) will likely utilize LinkedIn, while Viadeo is used to attract professionals in France (Lacoste, 2016). Social media creates a more globally-available environment to increase potential leads, availability for conversations, and transfer of information to a broader audience.

An interesting gap in the academic literature on this topic exists, as there is limited research associated with the influence of social media on sales force practice (Marshall et al., 2012). The increased use of social media for business emphasizes the importance of developing a better understanding of users and their attitudes toward it (Gangadharatbali, 2008). But, majority of the studies examining salespeople use of social media are conceptual (Agnihotri et al., 2012; Andzulis et al., 2012; Marshall et al., 2012; Trainor, 2012). Very limited are empirical papers (please refer to Table 1) that test antecedents and outcomes of B2B salespeople using social media, but this line of enquiry is limited in scope as its setting is almost entirely on U.S.-based sales forces (e.g., Rapp et al., 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2012). To fill these research gaps, we pursue an empirical inquiry involving social media use in B2B sales and set our study in the non-western context of India, which is one of the fastest-growing economies.

2. Identification of research question

While great opportunity exists for using social media, functions of social media platforms are what dictate their value and whether they acquire information (Singaraju, Nguyen, Niininen, & Sullivan-Mort, 2016) or share information to achieve communication goals such as raising brand awareness (Wang, Hsiao, et al., 2016). Social media networks extend the influence of salespeople and provide them with opportunities to enhance their behaviors and, in turn, their performance, as well as the opportunity to connect with customers on a new level. Additionally, social media provides an opportunity for a unique type of communication, as social listening may help salespeople see what is being said about their own brand and competitors. One of the main advantages of social media is the low cost associated with its use compared to that associated with other sales technologies deployed.

Few studies are found to empirically test the role of social media and its effects on the behaviors of salespeople, sales outcomes, and the general selling process (Andzulis et al., 2012), especially in the B2B environment (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Rapp et al., 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2012; Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014). This is alarming, as sales executives foresee the potential of social media in facilitating and influencing salespeople’s behaviors, competence, and success in today’s technology-enabled marketplace (see Appendix A). At the same time, academia (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2012) and industry (see Appendix A) agree on the fact that social media use has been limited at the salesperson level due to the lack of organization-wide social media strategies. Researchers have been slow in pursuing empirical academic research on social media in the B2B context and, thus, they offer little guidance to managers (Wiersema, 2013).

This study examines the role of social media and its effects on the selling process in a B2B setting. Table 1 identifies the academic literature on social media that forms this paper’s foundation. Theoretical advances provide valuable direction and guidance for organizations and managers integrating social media into their communications. Additionally, an overview of empirical work in the area is provided, describing each study as well as its respective sample and context.

Literature in the sales technology domain aids in exploring and defining antecedents and outcomes of salespeople's social media use in the B2B context. Additional factors include the quick speeds of social media interactions and the ability for senders to receive confirmation that messages have been read (Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016). The use of social media has been discussed in the context of the learning process of salespeople (Rollins et al., 2014), and previous literature suggests that the learning style of an individual is highly associated with social media adaption by the individual (Baird & Fisher, 2005; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). This is especially relevant within the context of using new technology platforms because learning goal oriented individuals “enjoy the challenge of learning new features of the technology and develop self confidence in using the technology” (Mun & Hwang, 2003, p. 437). Therefore, understanding the role that a salesperson’s learning goal orientation plays in a social media context will be of significance to both theory and practice.

This study also examines outcomes of social media use. Andzulis et al. (2012) and Moncrief et al. (2015) suggest that salespeople can use social media to support different steps in the selling process. Social media can increase the amount of information about competitors and customers that can be collected, which in turn can be used by salespeople to adapt their behaviors to suit different selling situations they may encounter. Social media provides salespeople with new approaches to reach potential customers (Inks, Schetzle, & Avila, 2011; Moore et al., 2015). Salespeople were found to deploy social media to support the different responsibilities they are required to complete in the selling process, from prospecting and handling objections to closing and following up (Moore et al., 2015). Accordingly, the proposed framework also includes the effects of social media use on competitive intelligence collection, adaptive selling behavior and performance of salespeople.

Now that social media’s presence in B2B sales has been introduced and the current study’s research goals have been identified, a conceptual model will be formed. For this, we build upon the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975) to relate antecedents and consequences to a salesperson’s social media use. TRA has been used as a basis for other models such as the Technology Acceptance Model in general (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989), and sales technology and social media adaption in particular (Hsu & Lin, 2008). Seven hypotheses are developed in a model based on academic research in marketing. Fig. 1 shows the conceptual model with all hypotheses. Results of the study are provided, and both theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1 To get a better understanding of the social media landscape within a B2B sales context, we conducted a minor data collection of a qualitative nature. Aligning with the relevant literature (e.g., Jackson & Trochim, 2002), a survey instrument involving three open-ended questions was utilized. The questions (e.g., What do you think the current state of “Social Media in B2B Sales” in your organization’s salesforce is?) assessed the current state of social media, associated challenges, opportunities and research needs. Utilizing the snowball sampling technique, six national/regional-level sales executives operating in the B2B area in India completed our survey. All the respondents were male and reported an average age of 46.5 (range from 37 to 51) years old. Please refer to Appendix A for more details.
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