



## Social media: Influencing customer satisfaction in B2B sales



Raj Agnihotri<sup>a,\*</sup>, Rebecca Dingus<sup>b</sup>, Michael Y. Hu<sup>c</sup>, Michael T. Krush<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The University of Texas at Arlington, 701 West Street, Arlington, TX 76019, United States

<sup>b</sup> Central Michigan University, 100 Smith Hall, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859, United States

<sup>c</sup> Kent State University, 475 Terrace Drive, Kent, OH 44242, United States

<sup>d</sup> North Dakota State University, 316 Richard H. Barry Hall, 811 2nd Avenue, North, Fargo, ND 58108, United States

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 20 July 2013

Received in revised form 7 August 2014

Accepted 24 September 2014

Available online 15 September 2015

#### Keywords:

Sales management

Salesperson social media use

Information communication

Customer satisfaction

### ABSTRACT

Social media have changed how buyers and sellers interact, and increased involvement through social media may yield positive results for sales organizations if salespeople utilize it in facilitating their behaviors. Through the perspective of value creation, we test the mediating effects of salesperson information communication behaviors between social media use and customer satisfaction. Using salesperson-reported data, within a B2B context, we empirically test a model using structural equation modeling. Salesperson's use of social media is found to impact information communication behaviors, which enhance salesperson responsiveness and customer satisfaction. Also, salesperson responsiveness is found to have a positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Findings suggest that social media plays an important role in communicating information to customers, but as an antecedent enhancing salesperson behaviors to increase customer satisfaction rather than a direct factor. This encourages managers to carefully assess goals related to social media use of their sales force.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Social media is changing our world. Through the advent of smartphones and social media, accessibility of information is higher than it ever has been before. Customers are frequently asked to “like” companies on Facebook, to “follow” companies on Twitter, or to “connect” via LinkedIn. As a result, customers are becoming better connected to companies, more knowledgeable about product selections, and more powerful in buyer-seller relationships.

In broad terms, incorporating the use of social media in customer interactions is a logical progression for firms to expand communication with their customers (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010). For instance, trade-media encourage the use of social media (e.g. Wirthman, 2013) for firms, suggesting that social media is important for business as it aids in generating business exposure, increasing traffic, and providing marketplace insight (Stelzner, 2012).

From a sales force perspective, Andzulis, Panagopoulos, and Rapp (2012) assert that social media should be an integral part of a firm's repertoire, as it allows salespeople to engage customers and build social capital that would “encourage customers to interact, engage, and establish relationships with them” (Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, & Singh, 2012, p. 341). For instance, blog posts can be positioned to create discussion or debate as a means of listening to customers. Value propositions can be demonstrated through success stories shared on Facebook.

Networks on LinkedIn can be used to build awareness and gain referrals (Andzulis et al., 2012). In sum, active use of social media can help salespeople in their communication with customers (Agnihotri et al., 2012).

As such, we suggest two key downstream effects of social media within the sales domain. First, social media provides a means to communicate to customers in a manner that may plausibly enable greater salesperson responsiveness. For instance, when consumer complaints are lodged on a social networking site, 58% of consumers want a response; yet only 22% report receiving a response (Right Now Technologies, 2010). Hence, social media may provide one means to enable the salesperson to communicate in a more responsive manner.

Second, social media may have implications on customer satisfaction. In general, with increased interactions and contact with firms, power is shifting from seller to buyer (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). An increase in buyer-seller collaboration and co-creation of knowledge and value (Greenberg, 2010) has placed buyers on a more equal footing with sellers. As such customers may hold higher expectation for these interactions and engagements, such that firms and customer contact employees must adapt (Hibbert, Winklhofer, & Temerak, 2012) or risk alienating or losing their customer base. For instance, a Harris Interactive report found that 82% of consumers have discontinued dealing with a company as a result of a negative experience (Right Now Technologies, 2010). Hence, social media may provide a means to better enable positive experiences that meet the expectations of the customer base.

Therefore, this paper considers the importance of social media in a business-to-business (B2B) sales context. To build our theoretical foundation, we consider what is already known about social media interactions in a business-to-consumer (B2C) context and expand upon this

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: 817-272-3016.

E-mail addresses: [rajshekar.agnihotri@uta.edu](mailto:rajshekar.agnihotri@uta.edu) (R. Agnihotri), [rebecca.dingus@cmich.edu](mailto:rebecca.dingus@cmich.edu) (R. Dingus), [mhu@kent.edu](mailto:mhu@kent.edu) (M.Y. Hu), [michael.krush@ndsu.edu](mailto:michael.krush@ndsu.edu) (M.T. Krush).

in the B2B realm. Broadly, we ask whether social media positively impacts customer satisfaction within the B2B domain. Many papers call for research in this area (e.g., Trainor, 2012; Agnihotri et al., 2012; Andzulis et al., 2012), but our examination of the literature did not yield research in this area.

To consider the effects of social media on customer satisfaction, we consider the sales relationship more holistically. The work of Agnihotri et al. (2012) provides a framework for salesperson social media use, investigating how social media helps salespeople to maximize customer value. Further, the literature notes that social media encompasses an array of technology; and the use of technology often enables information communication between the buyer and seller within the sales relationship (Agnihotri, Rapp, & Trainor, 2009). Extending this research stream, this article bridges the gap to better understand the links from salespeople's social media as a means to express communication that enables responsiveness and customer satisfaction, as perceived by salespeople.

Hence, our research fulfills a specific research gap. To date, academic research has yet to explore how customer satisfaction is affected by the implementation of social media in B2B sales relationships. Further, we have little understanding of the factors and the pathway which provide a successful route for social media to deliver customer satisfaction. As such, this paper's research objective is to build upon the information communication literature and recent scholarly advances in the area of social media use within industrial selling, to develop and empirically test a model relating salespeople's social media use to customer satisfaction. To foreshadow the results, we find that salespeople using social media technology can enhance customer satisfaction; however, it is essential that salespeople use social media as a means to effectively communicate information. This communication enables greater responsiveness and satisfaction. The findings of this paper provide a springboard for additional research, and the practical implications are many.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Information communication between buyer and seller

To develop our conceptual model, we align with the literature on information communication within sales and business relationships with the literature on sales technology. The first link in our conceptual model relates information communication with customer satisfaction and information communication to salesperson responsiveness.

The literature surrounding relationship marketing emphasizes the significance of communication between buyer and seller to solidify the relationship within the exchange process (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Communication, as posited by relational marketing scholars, can be described as the “information shared between exchange partners” (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006, p. 138). Specifically, in the industrial selling context, researchers have highlighted the importance of information communication by the salesperson as a key contributor to customers' positive experiences. For example, Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones (2007) consider information communication as one of the behaviors that salespeople can use to improve customer satisfaction and trust, even after a purchase has been made. Similarly, Agnihotri et al. (2009) argue that during the sales process, “information communication can provide not only a ground for a winning proposition but also customer satisfaction” (p. 481).

Jones, Brown, Zoltners, and Weitz (2005) acknowledge the heightening expectations of buyers. Buyers have an increasingly higher level of expectations for the salesperson to be alert and sensitive to the customers' needs. Salespeople have a need to focus on providing vital information in a quick and responsive manner, as industrial customers are often compelled to make competent business decisions in a swift manner.

Customers utilize their market relationships (Anderson & Dubinsky, 2004) in a similar manner as salespersons to enable “an effective and efficient means of obtaining information” (Crosby, Evans, & Coles, 1990,

p. 77). The salesperson's level of information communication can provide the customer with a responsive source of knowledge that is often required when purchasing a complex product or solution. Salespeople providing this information may be able to yield greater response timeliness and improve customer satisfaction. Hence, we suggest that a strong basis exists to theoretically link information communication to both customer satisfaction and to responsiveness.

### 2.2. Information technology

In a parallel stream that considers the influence of technology on information communication, marketing scholars argue that salespeople should be aware of the emerging technology tools that can enable the exchange process to become more efficient and effective (Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd, & Lee, 2012; Rodriguez, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012). The literature (e.g., Hunter & Perreault, 2007) has supported the use of sales technology within a sales force as it enhances the information communication process.

In terms of technology pertinent to the sales field, extant research acknowledges the evolution of customer relationship management (CRM) and its shift to include social media as a way to increase relationships with the term social CRM. Social CRM incorporates the use of the latest technology (here, social media) as a way of going beyond the traditional role of technology, such that it also raises customer involvement (Trainor, 2012).

For our paper, we utilize the salesperson's use of social media as the precursor to information technology. The use of social media as defined by Agnihotri et al. (2012) is described as “any social interaction-enhancing technology that can be deployed by sales professionals to generate content (e.g., blogs, microblogs, wikis) and develop networks (e.g., social networks, online communities)” (p. 334). Aligning our description with the sales technology literature, in a broad sense, “salesperson social media use” can be defined as a salesperson's utilization and integration of social media technology to perform his or her job (Ahearne, Jelinek, & Rapp, 2005; Rapp, Agnihotri, & Forbes, 2008). In this sense, social media operates as a technology that the sales force can use to build networks and better communicate information.

Social media introduces a ‘new avenue’ for two-way communication and creates ‘possibilities’ for more positive interactions between buyers and sellers if used properly. By extending sales interactions in a way that welcomes two-way communication, non-selling activities and relationship components such as prospecting and after-sales follow-ups are encouraged through the use of social media. This makes it easier for potential customers to ask questions or express needs while also making it more natural for salespeople to uncover additional selling opportunities, track customer activity, and communicate success stories (Andzulis et al., 2012).

The literature also highlights the importance of the link between the salesperson's use of social media and information communication. The literature has argued that the use of technology within the sales force “represents only a necessary, but not sufficient, criterion for performance” and “it is important to note that the mediating role of the manner of use is equally vital” (Sundaram, Schwarz, Jones, & Chin, 2007, p. 104). For instance, Hunter and Perreault (2007) posit that sharing market knowledge will mediate the impact of sales technology and performance outcomes. Conclusively, one must be mindful of salesperson behaviors and other goals of social media interactions when examining customer satisfaction.

Information communication is one of the key behaviors that must be maintained in order for customers to be satisfied. Jones et al. (2005) acknowledge this issue of heightening expectations of buyers, growing amounts of information that salespeople have, and the difficulty that salespeople may experience when trying to focus on providing vital information. Salespeople providing this information can extend relationships and improve customer satisfaction. Customers have a high level

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1027364>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1027364>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)