



# How Managers' Shared Mental Models of Business–Customer Interactions Create Different Sensemaking of Social Media

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Available online 5 July 2015

## Abstract

Building on empirical research, we identify four mental models of business–customer interactions and show how each uniquely affects how managers conceptualize and use social media. The four models are “business-to-customers,” “business-from-customers,” “business-with-customers,” and “business-for-customers.” The mental model approach helps explain why managers’ use of social media does not necessarily lead to radical changes in their interaction with customers, despite the opportunities facilitated by these media. We provide a conceptual framework that enables managers to introspectively investigate their own mental models and thereby revise their sensemaking and use of social media.

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*Keywords:* Mental models; Cultural models; Business–customer interaction; Social media; Marketing; Management; Cognition; Sensemaking; ZMET; SMSM

## Introduction

More than one billion people use social media, and research suggests that up to 85% of consumers prefer that companies interact with them on social media (Nail 2009). Similarly, an increasing number of businesses explicitly recognize the value of social media, especially for marketing and advertising (Aral, Dellarocas, and Godes 2013). In 2009, this recognition became dominant among the top 500 retailers, with 75% gaining a presence on social media (Kunz and Hackworth 2011). Adding to these findings, more executives view social media as having a positive impact on business outcomes (Fitzgerald et al. 2013).

While managers are increasingly recognizing the need to include social media into their communication models they still are at odds with adjusting their approach to take advantage of social media opportunities and achieve more effective use (Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden 2011). This lack of adjustment might be based on a vendor-driven environment, or an adoption

by imitation (e.g., if my competitor does it, so should I), but currently not a deep, underlying understanding of what the social media technology can do. It follows that companies adopting social media might do so without a clear understanding of why, and as a result, the desired outcome is not always achieved. In echoing this point of view, Kiron et al. (2012) found that the biggest obstacle to adoption of social media is a lack of management understanding.

Given that management cognition constitutes an important barrier for companies, this qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews with managers, explores how mental models of business–customer interactions affect the sensemaking of social media. Sensemaking refers to the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005). Research has shown that managers’ mental models in other contexts have a decisive influence on the sensemaking of professional domains (e.g., Gary and Wood 2011). We infer that the sensemaking (qua mental models) of traditional business–customer interactions frames how managers conceptualize and eventually integrate social media into business. We develop a social media sensemaking model (SMSM) that depicts how

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socio-historical antecedents through mental models of business–customer interactions influence managers’ sensemaking of social media. The model reflects these three-tiered layers.

Some research suggests that social media adaptation is an organic and progressive process that evolves linearly over time with incremental improvements to already established technologies. Eventually, this process may lead to a profound business conversion (Chen, Fay, and Wang 2011; Labrecque et al. 2013; Li and Solis 2013). Other research suggests that social media is a disruptive technology that creates immediate and unexpected changes (Achrol and Kotler 2012; Manyika et al. 2013; Qualman 2009). According to Christensen (2003), a technology is disruptive when it replaces established technologies and shakes up an industry and/or market. The position we present herein does not align with either perspective. Instead, with empirical data, we show how managers’ sensemaking of social media is both informed and confined by internalized mental models of traditional business–customer interactions, even in the face of radical or disruptive technological innovations. Of note, neither research on online behavior nor our informants distinguish between social media platforms. This lack of differentiation reflects our broader focus, which regards social media as a phenomenon rather than specific platforms.

A growing stream of research indicates that social media disrupt how businesses interact with customers, including traditional means of communication and mass media (e.g., Gensler et al. 2013; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching 2013; Kietzmann et al. 2011; Truong and Simmons 2010). Aral, Dellarocas, and Godes (2013) present a broad research agenda for understanding the relationships among society, businesses, and social media. They argue that it is increasingly important for companies to learn how best to integrate social media into their overall strategy. Despite being casted as a game changer (Achrol and Kotler 2012; Ahlqvist et al. 2010; Gensler et al. 2013), other researchers have argued that social media, as a phenomenon, has yet to influence business practices in fundamental ways (Kiron et al. 2012, 2013; vor dem Esche and Hennig-Thurau 2013).

This discrepancy between, on the one hand, acknowledgment of social media’s importance and impact on the interaction with customers and, on the other hand, social media’s inability to fundamentally change business–customer interactions, even after a decade of being available, introduces a paradox: If managers are attuned to changes in market demand as well as customer preferences, why do most refrain from exploiting opportunities afforded by social media platforms, such as engaging and interacting with customers in fundamentally new ways? Although part of such inaction might be attributed to practical, educational, or financial limitations (e.g., Fischer and Reuber 2011; vor dem Esche and Hennig-Thurau 2013), it still seems disadvantageous for businesses to ignore such strong market preferences for change. Investments in social media software and training have increased dramatically across businesses, suggesting that social media are perceived as relevant. Still, in many instances social media appear not to have affected prevailing business cultures or how businesses interact with their customers (Fitzgerald et al. 2013).

As such, other factors must be at play. One of these factors is managers’ sensemaking of social media. Sensemaking draws on internalized mental models, which derive their sustenance from their socio-historical significance. Moreover, the more deeply anchored mental models only change gradually over time. That is, when first internalized they become the anchoring point for sensemaking within a given domain. This follows Zahra and Nambisan’s (2012) observation that management cognition often constitutes an important barrier for companies and represents a key obstacle for having managers question current ways of doing business to open up new business possibilities.

Research in marketing (Lilien 2011; Wind 2009), management (Gary and Wood 2011), strategic cognition (Porac and Thomas 1990, 2002), and service recovery (Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, and Christensen 2007) provides valuable and surprising insights into how mental models can affect business–customer sensemaking and interactions. These streams of research corroborate our working assumption—that new technology does not automatically change the way managers interact with the market or enable managers to gain new strategic insights and perspectives. The topic of this article also speaks to Truong and Simmons’s (2010) concern that there is a lack of academic work related to various aspects of new media use, and Gary and Wood’s (2011) call for additional research on how to develop reflection tools to help managers question and reframe their own mental models and decision rules.

This article contributes to literature in many ways. First, it identifies four mental models of business–customer interactions. Second, it traces the socio-historical origins of these mental models to provide support for their general influence, distribution, and significance. Third, it shows how each mental model affects how managers conceptualize social media, thereby illustrating the importance of how managers’ sensemaking influences social media decision making (see Narayanan, Zane, and Kemmerer 2011). Fourth, it provides a contrary view to the idea that social media is a necessarily disruptive technology (Aral, Dellarocas, and Godes 2013; Rapp et al. 2013); that is, we argue that mental models often preserve “old” ways of thinking and thus limit dynamic change. Fifth, the article provides empirically grounded insights into the influence of mental models on marketing cognition within a field whose research is typically conceptually driven. For example, Gary and Wood (2011, p. 569) state, “Despite substantial evidence of mental models’ influence on strategic decision-making, there is limited empirical evidence for the link between mental model accuracy and performance.” Finally, the article provides a conceptual model that helps managers identify their own mental model of the business–customer interaction and reflect on whether such a mental model is optimal in light of the opportunities afforded by social media technology.

The structure of the article is as follows: We begin by introducing the theoretical approach that links mental models with socio-cognitive theories, after which we argue for the relevance of collecting data through a partial ZMET in-depth interview format (including photo-elicitation techniques). We

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