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Social media in business-to-business marketing and sales: Review of literature & research
recommendations

By

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Abstract

Social media usage in business-to-business marketing and sales has been steadily rising since its advent in the late 2000s. Similarly, research surrounding social media in this context has increased, with specific focus on its usage, influence, and adoption from B2B marketers and salespeople. This focus has resulted in gaps in the literature, especially when regarding small and medium B2B enterprises. This review of literature provides a systemic understanding of the research landscape by identifying the theory, methods, context, and results of twenty-one peer-reviewed business marketing articles concerning social media. This review also proposes five key recommendations to inform future research in this field.

Introduction

The advent of social media has heavily disrupted strategy and deployment in business to consumer sales and marketing. However, business-to-business (B2B) marketers have not adopted as quickly. While a significant amount of the available literature focuses on social media's use, influence, and impact, there are opportunities to further develop this research in the small and medium enterprise (SME) B2B sector. Following the theory mapping utilized in industrial marketing literature reviews by Reid and Plank (2000), Moller (2013), and Salo (2017), this paper reviews 21 recent peer-reviewed articles as a sample representing the current state social media research in B2B marketing.

Businesses' use of social media in their B2B marketing effort *has* risen dramatically in the last decade. Academic discussion surrounding the topic has increased as well. Consumer interest in online communication technologies has risen significantly in the last 50 years (see Mathews, Wilson, and Backhaus, 1977 and Trainor, Rapp, Beitelspacher, and Schillewaert, 2011). B2B social media marketing literature usually relies on anecdotal, singular case studies that provide little in the way of empirical research (Swani, 2016). Jussila, Kärkkäinen, and Aramo-Immonen (2014) describes the research as “quite fragmented” and “based on individual, often not too systematically and analytically reported cases”.

Salo's (2017) literature review of social media research in the industrial marketing field illuminated a need for industrial marketing academics to look toward social media's influence in the industry, in buyer-seller relationships, and in suppliers/customer acquisition. He argues that there persists a gap in research on social media when regarding suppliers, customer acquisition, and customers. While Salo frames the literature by discipline and method, this paper uses a theory-to-results framework that identifies a different set of gaps. Specifically, analysis of this

review reveals that research gaps exist regarding social media in the SME business-to-business marketing context, theory development, actual effectiveness vs. perceived effectiveness, content, and associated technologies (i.e. big data analytics). This review also agrees with Salo that traditional methods like qualitative, survey, or conceptual research are widely available on existing topics, but there's opportunity for academics to employ methodological pluralism and quantitative analyses in this discourse.

Methodology

Industrial marketing, making up a significant portion of B2B marketing activity, has had a handful of literature reviews over the years that have established a review methodology employed by this paper. Namely, Salo (2017), Moller (2013), and Plank (2000) utilized empirical analyses on the industrial marketing literature to explain where gaps exist in the literature. Like Salo (2017), this paper uses the three stage systematic review process established in Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart (2003).

First, a need for this paper was identified by a careful reading of existing literature reviews in industrial marketing, small business marketing, and B2B marketing. Recent literature reviews focused on social media in industrial marketing on its own, while this paper frames its selected industrial marketing research articles as a part of a larger discussion regarding B2B marketing. Thus, a need for a "social media in business-to-business marketing" literature review was identified. In this stage, research was also conducted to collect a sample representing this discourse. Using Google Scholar, Portland State University's Library search, and JSTOR, the following keywords were employed as search keywords (with some sub-variations of each): small business marketing, business-to-business marketing, industrial marketing, social media,

and online marketing. From the search results, 46 potential articles were collected and loaded into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis and classification.

Second, a set of criteria for article inclusion in the review was developed. These were: the articles must come from peer reviewed journals, the articles must be focused on social media in B2B marketing, and the articles must have been published in 2010 or sooner. By applying the criteria to the Excel spreadsheet, the total number of articles to be reviewed was reduced to 21. Next, analysis of the articles was performed. This began by creating fields for each article's theory, method and context, and results. Subsequently, each article was read with an effort in concisely summarizing each of these aspects.

Finally, once each article's theory, method, and results were identified and collected in the Excel spreadsheet, analysis of each was performed, which is presented in this paper as the review. The most recent literature reviews (Salo, 2017 and Moller, 2013) had framed the literature using Reid and Plank's (2000) thematic classification method- involving 28 categories for the research. This paper presents each article reviewed, as well as reframes some research reviewed by Salo (2017) into the theory-results classification method. Each article's research theory and results were classified into one of four categories: regarding influence, adoption, and usage, regarding content, regarding theory development, or regarding social media's peripheral technologies. Finally, gaps were identified, and presented in the recommendations section of this paper.

Review and Analysis

This review presents 21 selected articles published by 2010 or sooner as a representative sample of social media research in the B2B marketing and sales context. Each article is analyzed to understand the proposed theory, the methodology employed, and the results received. The articles have been classified under four topics: 1) research on the influence, adoption, and usage of social media by B2B marketers, 2) research on the marketing content posted on B2B social media platforms, 3) research on wider B2B social media marketing theory, and 4) research on associated technologies and their effects on B2B marketing. Articles are analyzed in chronological order.

Influence, adoption, and usage

Business-to-business organizations benefit strongly from online branding. Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides (2011) argue that only limited research exists on the possibility of social networking sites as B2B marketing tools. They launched a survey focused on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the UK. Their findings suggest that 25%+ of surveyed SMEs are using social media to support their branding goals. The authors also identify that perceived usefulness of social media remains a significant barrier to usage in specific sectors. This results in many B2B SMEs that do not assess social networking effectiveness through any established metrics.

Distribution and knowledge of business innovations has grown wider with the advent of new technologies. Jussila, Kärkkäinen, and Leino (2011) argue that social media can further widen business innovation reach. Furthermore, innovation can benefit from the interaction and collaboration social media provides. Through a survey of Finnish businesses and literature analysis, the authors find that social media use possibilities, in innovation and customer

interaction contexts, are not as well understood in B2B sectors as they are in business-to-consumer sectors. Noting that in general, B2B research is “very scarce”, Jussila, et. al., also provide answers to barriers to social media understanding identified by a 2010 study from the same authors.

Andzulis, Panagopoulos, and Rapp (2012) reviewed the challenges that social media adoption has faced in sales industries. In identifying the stages of the sales process that social media influences (or can influence), Andzulis, et. al., show where academic research could inform further use of social media by sales professionals. The authors find that more research should be conducted on how social media can inform customer approach and needs discovery.

Before Rodriguez, Peterson, and Krishnan published their article in 2012, little empirical research had been conducted on the influence social media networking has on sales performance. To measure these outcomes, the authors collected data from 1,699 B2B salespeople, spanning 25+ industries. Their results indicated that a positive relationship exists between social media use, the sales process, and relationship sales performance, through the creation of unique opportunities for relationship management.

Jussila, Kärkkäinen, and Aroma-Immonen (2014) tackle the general resistance from business-to-business companies to adopt social media. They argue that the literature has not given proper attention to the use cases, challenges, and opportunities of social media in the B2B world. Through an analysis of their survey involving 125 Finland-based B2B companies, Jussila, et. al., found that a gap exists “between the perceived potential” and the real-world use of social media by these companies, contradicting earlier studies of social media technology adoption. They also propose addressing the challenges that create this gap by recommending further academic and pragmatic research of social media’s possibility in B2B sectors.

Small businesses across the U.S. have also been impacted by B2B social media opportunities. Jones, Borgman, and Ulusoy (2015) noted as much when exploring the economic impact social media has had on B2B SMEs in underserved areas in the United States. The authors employ five interviews and two surveys with Maine-based small business managers/owners from areas described by the state department as “economically depressed”. The authors found that social media enabled these small businesses to cultivate relationships with existing customers, co-promote with local businesses, and increase their reach for new B2B customers with higher success than B2B SMEs that did not use social media as part of their marketing strategy.

Broekemier, Chai, and Seshadri (2015) sought to understand how social media was used by these B2B SMEs in the United States. Through a survey of a national sample of B2B small businesses, the authors were able to identify four main purposes of social media for them. These uses were “(1) improving company reputation, (2) increasing customer interest, (3) increasing customer awareness, and (4) promoting business to new customers”. The study also found that most businesses that do not use social media as a marketing tool do not plan to do so in the near future. Finally, the authors note that 25% of SMEs that do use social media do not measure its effectiveness to meet their marketing goals.

The research on social media’s perceived usefulness in B2B sectors continues with Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidou, and Valvi (2015). Using resource-based theory and the technology acceptance model, the authors develop a conceptual framework that they tested through quantitative data and nine qualitative interviews from B2B organizations in the United Kingdom. The results showed that social media adoption on behalf of B2B enterprises in the UK

is influenced by factors such as image, perceived barriers/ease of use, organizational innovativeness, and perceived usefulness.

Business-to-business sales can greatly benefit from social media use, argues Guesalaga (2016). The success of social media use in sales is dependent on a few key factors. By surveying 220 sales American sales professionals, Guesalaga finds that individual commitment, organizational competence, and organizational commitment are predictors of social media utilization. Outside of the organization, they conclude that individual commitment and competence have heightened “synergistic effects” on sales success when paired with social media.

Niedermeier, Wang, and Zhang (2016) studied the use of social media by B2B salespeople in China. Using three interviews from sales managers and survey data from 42 sales representatives, the authors found that nearly all the surveyed sales professionals integrate social media in their sales work. They also found that salespeople in China generally perceive social media as a crucial way to build *guanxi* (social networks and relationships of power) with their leads. Niedermeier, et. al., show their study implying that social media is a window into “the ancient and culturally unique construct of *guanxi*”.

Wang, Pauleen, and Zhang (2016) explore the effects of social media apps in the B2B context. The authors create a model based on media synchronicity theory that investigates the relationship between social media’s capabilities and B2B communication performance. Through five interviews with senior managers at small/medium enterprises, the authors found a positive relationship between the transmission velocity, rehearsability, reprocessability, and parallelism of social media with B2B communication. The authors also identify information security as a

gap in social media apps capabilities, which could be added to the model after more research is done to verify their finding.

Following the findings developed for U.S., U.K, and Dutch B2B organizations, Veldeman, Van Praet, and Mechant (2017) explore how Belgian B2B companies perceive social media's usefulness. They survey 92 companies in the IT and Industrial industries with active marketing operations. Their responses reveal that 86% of companies use social media to market to target segments. The authors use the technology acceptance model alongside survey responses to illustrate that Belgian IT companies adopt social media at a higher rate than industrial companies due to how they perceive social media's usefulness.

Focusing on learning orientation as an enabler of social media use, Itani, Agnihotri, and Dingus (2017) examined how B2B salespeople used social media to assist them with their work. They proposed that attitude and learning orientation were key determinants in the rate of social media use on behalf of the salesperson. Relying heavily on attitude-behavior relationship research (especially Ngai, Tao, and Moon (2015)), the authors found that although their research did not support that a relationship exists between attitude toward social media's usefulness and social media's use, there is a positive relationship between learning orientation, competitive intelligence, and social media's perceived usefulness (and therefore actual use). Peripherally, the authors also discovered that social media positively influences selling behavior.

Continuing to investigate the difference between business-to-consumer and B2B social media use, Swani, Milne, Brown, Assaf, and Donthu (2017) use psychological motivation theory to identify differences in posted content between these two markets. They analyze Fortune 500 companies' Facebook posts to understand the content that consumers most interact with. Their results indicate that B2B messages grow in popularity with "the inclusion of corporate brand

names, functional appeals, and information search cues” when compared to business to consumer messages of the same type. Finally, they find also that B2B content gets more likes, but less comments, than business to consumer content.

The breadth of marketing strategy options that social media can open for SMEs grows as more research on use is available. Zakayo (2018) continues this expansion with a study on the social media marketing strategies from SMEs in Kenya’s Nakuru Central Business District. Using primary survey data from 78 small businesses alongside secondary research on 350 registered CBD businesses, the study sought to understand which social media strategies most influenced sales performance in the Nakuru CBD. The results of analyzing this research showed that online marketing strategies have a positive influence on B2B SME sales performance. Zakayo recommended that SMEs invest in improving their social media marketing strategies to affect ~65% positive variation in sales performance.

A prevalent assumption in this discipline is that B2B companies operate social media differently than business-to-consumer companies. That assumption is the focus of Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, and Yau (2019). Leaning on the customer engagement cycle developed by Sashi (2012), Iankova, et. al., also employ 449 survey responses regarding social media usage by SMEs from both sectors to specifically identify the assumed differences in social media use. Many of the differences between B2B and B2C social media usage were confirmed by the study. There are also distinct differences in usage in B2B2C companies. The authors use their data to attribute the difference to how these two business models perceive social media’s usefulness- specifically, B2B companies tend to perceive social media as less useful for their sector than B2C companies.

Content

Which content is effective as a marketing tool for B2B companies is an important dimension to existing academic research. Holliman and Rowley (2014) looked at a wide range of digital marketing channels, including social media platforms, to determine what type of content marketers perceive as most effective. They conducted 15 interviews with B2B digital marketers in France, UK, and USA. Their findings indicated that B2B audiences resonate with specific types of “helping” content. As an inbound marketing technique, B2B digital marketing is most effective when its content employs relevant and compelling data presented from a branded “publishing” approach.

Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, and Mäläskä (2015) analyze B2B content on social media to understand the unique approaches B2B marketers bring to online social platforms. Through text-mining methods, the authors explored the content published on LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram by B2B enterprises. They found that B2B marketers can significantly influence content marketing on social media platforms by training employees on creating company-positive content.

Theory Development

Möller (2013) answered the call for business marketing’s need for theory development. Building off the recent developments in relationship marketing and network approach, building off previous work in multi-research approaches, Möller argues for a more practical approach to relationship marketing theory. Moller crafts an articulated theory map analyzing five different business marketing methods. The author then recommends the development of two theories-market-based and network-based business marketing, both of which benefit from social media as a tool. Due to the richness of their outcomes, Möller suggests that the articulated theory map employed by their research could help co-create a general theory of business marketing.

Peripheral Technologies

Information technology's use in marketing has been of keen interest to researchers for decades, growing stronger as accessibility to data analytics has risen in technology platforms. Trainor, Rapp, Beitelspacher, and Schillewaert (2011) develop and test a model that defines e-marketing as “the integration of complementary technology” (including social media) with business resources. In surveying 522 Belgian companies, Trainor, et. al., found that when employees are technologically oriented, they can better utilize e-marketing. Their results show that when businesses are able to holistically implement IT-based marketing tools, customer satisfaction and retention can be improved.

Big data analytics is a modern tool delved out of the age of social networks. Sivarajah, Irani, Gupta, and Mahroof (2019) seek to understand how big data and social analytics can facilitate business-to-business activities, including marketing. Through manager interviews and a literature review, the authors develop exploratory models that can impart knowledge of participatory web use to B2B professionals. In addition, the authors consider three dimensions of business sustainability as limiters to their recommended functions of operations and marketing. Soverajah, et. al., conclude that big data and social media analytics can enhance profitability, generate opportunities to engage with operations and marketing, and help B2B companies achieve environmental, social, and economic goals.

Insights and Recommendations

This review's goals were to 1) provide the reader with an understanding of the current state of B2B social media marketing research and 2) provide recommendations to discourse academics for future research options. This was done by identifying and analyzing the theory,

methods, and results of a representative sample of the literature, and presenting the gaps in the literature to inform future research, respectively.

Through a careful review of twenty-one articles matching specific criteria provided in this paper's methodology section, five key insights may be drawn for the marketing or sales researcher. First, the perceived usefulness of social media has received a considerable amount of attention on behalf of researchers across multiple countries. Nearly 30% of reviewed articles analyze the perceived usefulness of social media in B2B marketing. Primarily, social media's usage, adoption, and barriers in B2B marketing has received a significant amount of research in the current literature. Second, small and medium business-to-business companies have received little attention in social media marketing literature, accounting for only four articles in this review: Michaelidou, et. al. (2011), Jones, et. al. (2015), Broekemier, et. al. (2015), and Zakayo (2018). Any research available regarding social media in SME marketing contexts focuses significantly on perceived use, causing the literature to experience the same gaps that the wider B2B marketing literature suffers from. Third, research by academics regarding social media's peripheral technologies' use (i.e. big data) in B2B marketing is in an embryonic stage- there is significant potential to use the wealth of data provided by internet marketing tech (i.e. content engagement data) to understand how they may affect B2B marketing. Fourth, B2B marketing continues to have a need for theory development. As Moller (2013) identified, B2B marketers have a practical need for an encompassing theory that includes social media technology as a dimension. Finally, much of the research methodology indicates a dominant qualitative approach in the literature, with only one sampled article employing quantitative or mixed method approaches to support theories. Quantitative research in this field could numerically inform the

influences, measure the effectiveness of, or verify the channel strategy of B2B social media content, to name a few benefits.

Therefore, this review recommends five key research recommendations, to inform future literature about social media in B2B marketing. First, further research on adoption, influence, and usage of social media for small and medium enterprises. While a wealth of research exists about this for larger companies, SMEs could benefit from practical applications of this research in their context as well. Second, the literature could benefit from further B2B marketing theory development, allowing for practical applications of strategies and methods from the literature. Third, research should employ more quantitative methodologies. Survey and interview data dominate the current research landscape, while there is significant opportunity for researchers to employ quantitative methods in their practical recommendations. Fourth, some areas of social media in B2B marketing have not been visited at all. Specifically, ethics and forecasting are two gaps, identified in previous reviews (Salo, 2017), that have yet to receive attention from academics. For example, how do the worldviews of B2B marketers influence the content, metrics, or success of their social media marketing strategies? What kind of data collection and usage falls under corporate social responsibility? Finally, the applicability of international and cross-disciplinary research should be investigated. Much research has been provided on social media in business outside of the B2B context. How much of this literature can be applied to B2B marketing? What about corporate vs. SME research? In cultural research, could international studies' results apply across borders? How is social media affecting online marketing's cross-cultural landscape in B2B contexts?

Social media use in B2B marketing continues to grow, as has the research surrounding it. With these recommendations, the literature should expand to fill the gaps, with the ultimate goal

of providing a fuller understanding of how social media is, can be, should be, and will be utilized in this context.

Conclusion

This paper sought to answer the question- what research exists on social media in business-to-business marketing and sales, and what questions should be considered for future research? Through a systematic review of a representative sample of the literature surrounding this discourse, this paper answers the question through five key insights and recommendations for future research.

The three-staged approach, paired with the review structure, allows this review to answer this question comprehensively. The research began with 46 articles as candidates for the sample, and after determining the criteria of sourcing only from peer reviewed journals, focused on social media in B2B marketing, and publication dates of 2010 or sooner, the article count was reduced to 21. This allows the review to give an in depth look at each article through the established systematic review process through a careful reading of each. This review system begins with the identification and description of the theory of the article, then the methodology employed by the authors in their research context, and finally the results of their research. This review process yielded a robust panorama of the current research available surrounding social media in B2B marketing and sales, comprising the main body of this paper.

The second part of this paper's research question required providing future research recommendations for academics participating in the literature. This paper provides that answer through five insights and associated recommendations. These insights show the gaps in the existing literature, to inform potential future research. These gaps provide a perspective that shows a skewed amount of research toward the influence, use, and adoption of social media by

B2B marketers. Furthermore, business-to-business SMEs have been virtually ignored in the literature when compared to their corporate counterparts. This paper also finds that there remains a need for further development of a practical B2B marketing theory in the age of social media and peripheral technologies, like big data analytics. These gaps and more informed this paper's proposed recommendations, calling mainly for research in the practical application of research (including how it can cultural, disciplinary, and organizational contexts), the employment of the wealth of quantitative data provided by social media use to inform theories and methods, and research into completely ignored dimensions of the discipline- such as ethics.

By synthesizing this research into the digestible review method described in our methodology, this paper can inform researchers of where the literature stands today, and where contributions can be made to fill key gaps. Ultimately, the literature has potential to grow into practicality and theoretical breadth as use and adoption of social media increases in business-to-business marketing contexts.

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