

**SHOULD B2B TWEETS DIFFER FROM B2C TWEETS? AN ANALYSIS OF FORTUNE
500 COMPANIES' TWITTER COMMUNICATION**

Kunal Swani
Isenberg School of Management
University of Massachusetts
121 Presidents Drive
Amherst, MA 01003
(413) 274-4227
Fax (413) 545-3858
kswani@som.umass.edu

George R. Milne
Isenberg School of Management
University of Massachusetts
121 Presidents Drive
Amherst, MA 01003
(413) 545-5669
Fax (413) 545-3858
milne@isenberg.umass.edu

Brian P. Brown
VCU School of Business
Virginia Commonwealth University
PO Box 844000
Richmond, VA 23284
(804) 827-3516
bpbrown@vcu.edu

1. Track

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2. Keywords

B2B advertising; Longitudinal Content Analysis; Message Appeals; Social Media Twitter

3. Purpose of the Paper and Relevant Literature

The potential of social media as a marketing tool is undeniable. However, social media research and success stories about its effectiveness have been limited to those business-to-consumer (B2C) examples that suggest that social media leads to increases in brand awareness, loyalty, engagement, and ultimately sales (e.g., Taylor, Lewin & Strutton, 2011; Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). Before social media marketing can be deemed an unqualified success, marketers need to better understand its role in the business-to-business (B2B) arena.

B2B marketers have been hesitant to adopt social media marketing strategies. Only 5% of B2B marketers indicated that social media marketing was a well optimized part of their marketing mix, 17% do not use social media at all, and 58% noted that they were still in the initial stages of developing social media strategies (Giamanco & Gregoire, 2012). Marketing academics have offered little guidance as they have been slow to pursue research on social media phenomena in B2B settings. The few studies that do exist tend to be descriptive in nature and generally support the findings of practitioner studies.

Social media tools have been lauded for their ability to enhance collaboration, share content and build community (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009). Social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Twitter have been adopted increasingly by consumers as well as businesses as a result (Yang, 2012; Zaglia, 2013). Twitter is one of the most widely used social media sites among Fortune 500 companies.

The purpose of this research is to explore whether B2B marketers should adopt distinct Twitter message strategies (i.e., “tweets”) compared with their B2C counterparts. We use communication theory to advance understanding of the flow and process of communication in a social media context. Considering the conceptual distinctions of business and consumer markets, we investigate how marketers use Twitter differently across the two contexts in order to further understand social media phenomena.

B2B marketers generally use different encoding processes and hence pursue different branding and marketing communication strategies (Brown et al., 2012). More specifically, B2B marketers tend to promote their corporate brand much more than their individual product brands (Mudambi, 2002), and generally make more functional appeals to their constituents (Turley & Kelly, 1997; Lothia et al., 2003). Furthermore, B2B marketers include more informational cues and refrain from commercialism cues in their communications to their buyers. We use these criteria to develop hypotheses that denote the differences between B2B and B2C tweets.

4. Research Method

Our data is drawn from 289 Fortune 500 companies' tweets generated from their official Twitter accounts. These accounts were tracked on two separate weeklong occasions over a six month period. This resulted in 3,278 and 4,003 unique company tweets that were active during the time period 1 and time period 2 respectively. We use a longitudinal content analysis method to investigate how B2B and B2C "tweets" might need to differ.

Five research assistant coders were used to code the data. The intercoder reliability between the five coders was calculated on a randomly selected subsample of 100 messages from a separate data set (Lothia et al., 2003; Neuendorf, 2002). The intercoder reliability was calculated using Rust and Cooil's (1994) proportional reduction in loss index (PRL). All reliabilities were sufficiently high and above desired levels. The coders then coded the messages from the original dataset. Three coders coded a separate non-overlapping portion of the messages collected at time period 1, while the remaining two coders coded a separate non-overlapping portion of the messages collected at time period 2.

To test our hypotheses, we ran a main effects logistic regression to compare the message strategies across B2B and B2C tweets. The independent variables included: use of corporate brand name and use of product brand name, use of functional appeals and emotional appeals, use of direct calls to purchase ("hard sell" approach), and use of links and cues for information search and hashtags. To test our research question on time effects we ran a hierarchical logistic regression model.

5. Research Findings

We find that marketers in each setting indeed display significant differences in their branding and selling strategies, their use of message appeals, and their use of cues, links, and hashtags for information search. We tested seven hypotheses based on these differences and found support for six of them. Also, we found that the characteristics of B2B and B2C tweets shifted over time.

Our results indicate some differences in the usage (encoding process) of social media message strategies by B2B and B2C marketers. In B2B tweets, corporate name branding is more frequent than in B2C tweets. Perhaps our most intriguing finding, however, is that there appears to be no difference in the use of product brand names between the two contexts. The use of functional appeals was higher in B2B tweets than in B2C tweets. Furthermore, we find that emotional appeals are used more frequently in B2C tweets compared with B2B tweets. This is consistent with recent research that indicates that including emotional cues in B2B communication may be quite effective (Brown et al., 2012; Swani, Milne, & Brown 2012).

Our results show that B2C tweets use more direct calls to purchase than B2B tweets. We find that B2B tweets include more links and cues for information search in their messages compared with B2C tweets. Also, we find that the use of hashtags is more frequent in B2B tweets compared with B2C tweets. Furthermore, our data shows a higher usage of cues and links for information search, and hashtags in both B2B and B2C tweets. Regardless of the context, marketers appear to use Twitter as an information sharing platform more than a selling platform.

Finally, our results show that the characteristics of B2B and B2C tweets shifted over time, sometimes diverging and sometimes converging. We found that the use of functional appeals and

information search converged over time. We also find that the use of emotional appeals diverged over time.

6. Contribution

This research contributes to the B2B advertising and organizational buying literature primarily by providing theoretical explanations of and empirical support for differences in tweet strategies between the B2B and B2C contexts. Moreover, it is perhaps the most empirically rigorous research to date to explore social media phenomena in the B2B context. Indeed, the results of this research provide guidance to managers who are responsible for the social media communications.

7. References

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