

Social Media Use by Frontline B2B Sales Force in India

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Abstract

Relationship between buyer and suppliers is determined by contact pattern between two parties and it has impact on sales performance. Modern networking technologies like social media offers a method of managing a company's array of network relationships with customers. Hence the use of social media by frontline sales force is likely to be different for professional and personal use. This research studied differences in use of social media for professional and personal use by the frontline B2B sales person with respect to their performance, location and stages of their career. A survey instrument which measured the time spent by the sales force in professional and personal use, their location and their career stages was designed. A survey was administered and 205 responses were collected from sales force of a multinational company which had pan India presence. The empirical evidence showed no difference in social media usage for professional use with respect to their performance, location and stages of their career. However, significant differences was observed in personal usage with respect to age and location. The impact of age and location on social media usage for professional work was possibly suppressed by the organizational work processes and flows. Future work could use actual data rather than self reports.

Introduction

The sales performance depends on the intensity and nature of interaction between buyers, sellers and business networks (Turnbull, Ford & Cunningham 1996). Social media is a new method of engaging and managing relationships and is increasingly relevant for personal and professional networking. Hence, a large proportion of salespeople, use relationship-oriented social media applications in various stages of the selling process (Moore, Hopkins & Raymond 2013). Social media technologies are driving revolutionary changes in the way contemporary selling is conducted (Marshall et al. 2012).

The customer connect possible through social media makes it a valuable tool for sales professionals. With the prevalence of access of social media through the “always on and mobile” devices, it has become integral to the life of the users. Sales persons use social media for professional use like prospecting for new customers, interacting with existing customers and supervisors in their organizations. Sales persons also use it for personal objectives like entertainment and socialization with friend and family, which may have impact on their work related motivation also.

The distinction between personal and professional have merged into an indistinguishable maze and is an everyday issue. Employees use employer provided computers to check personal e-mail and interact in social networks. Use of boundary-crossing technologies in the workplace for personal purposes is prevalent (Garrett & Danziger 2008; Sánchez, Levin & Del Riego 2012).

With social media technologies becoming prevalent in work environments, there have been studies about practical usage of social media by the employees. However, studies about its usage by salespeople have mostly been observational (Schultz, Schwepker & Good 2012). Relatively little empirical quantitative research has appeared in the selling and sales management literature that focuses specifically on use of social media by the frontline sales force (Moore, Hopkins & Raymond 2013).

The performance of frontline sales force who deal with business buyers tend to be close, long term, with extensive contact patterns (Turnbull, Ford, and Cunningham 1996). However, widely spread out geographies and transportation challenges have traditionally restricted the interaction, which are now overcome by the social media technologies and good telecommunication connectivity.

Online behaviors of consumers are subtly different in nature from traditional consumer behavior due to the unique characteristics and interplay of technology and culture (Chau et al. 2002). Thus, technological as well as cultural differences are likely to be manifest in the use of social media by the sales force, their motivation and performance in different stages of their sales career. Researchers have so far not explored if there are significant differences in the social media use for professional and personal use among the frontline B2B sales force, at different stages of their career. This paper addresses this gap in literature. Since the social media behavior is culture specific, and the data collection is from India, the context of this research is Indian culture.

The flow of this article is as follows. This introductory section is followed by study of the literature and development of the conceptual basis for this study and the research hypotheses based on them. Then, the methodology used in this research is explained, which includes details about the data collection instrument, sample selection, and analytical procedures. In the next section, results are interpreted and implications of the findings are discussed thereafter. The paper concludes with the discussions of the limitations of this work and suggestions for future research.

Literature review

Literature on use of social media by the sales persons was explored as a starting point. Thereafter, the differences in the social media use due to inherent factor like national culture as well as sales person specific characteristics like their career stage and performance was explored.

Social media applications in the sales function

Activity in virtual communities and social networking sites, accounted for one in every eleven minutes spent online, on a global level and the figures are expected to increase significantly with time (Moore, Hopkins & Raymond 2013). Social media is utilized more for personal use than work (Patel 2010).

Although often enjoyed purely for personal information sharing and entertainment purposes, individuals and organizations are increasingly using social media to achieve other business specific goals like tracking customer voice, listening in customer forums (Moore, Hopkins & Raymond 2013).

Social media helps in establishing a bond among colleagues by providing them with the ability to better understand each other. This social connection could then help improve the overall work relationships (Diercksen et al. 2013).

Since communication and information sharing are essential for relationship development, most technologies that facilitate communication and information exchange are of particular interest to marketers and sales personnel. Social media applications allow salespeople to interact with customers in a way that customers want. Also, it gives them access to newer and more meaningful information about their customers, which was not previously available or was difficult to get (Trainor 2012). Research has also confirmed that social media use by sales force improves sales performance (Groza et al. 2012).

Age and career stage related differences in social media use

Motivation reflects the degree to which an individual wants to engage in certain specified behaviors. In order to do well in profession, one must (1) know what is required (role expectations), (2) have the ability to do what is required, (3) be motivated to do what is required, and (4) work in an environment in which intended actions can be translated into behavior (Mitchell 1982). Thus use social media is likely to be change based on age, the nature of the work and the stage of their career and all such variables that affect their motivation.

There are clear generational differences in the use of social media technology. It is expected that younger people are more likely to use, and feel more comfortable using, social media. Research has confirmed that younger buyers and sellers are more likely to prefer virtual, social media technology–based relationships, as opposed to the face-to-face relationships which are favored by their older colleagues. This age dynamic further complicates the integration of the social media into sales management function (Marshall et al. 2012, Schultz, Schwepker & Good 2012).

Emotions play an important role in motivating goal-directed behavior. Salespeople act on their feelings as well as on their thoughts (Brown, Cron & Slocum 1997). There is empirical evidence of clear difference in the social media usage of salespeople from different career stages in USA (Miao, Lund & Evans 2012).

National culture

The online behavior of consumers is different from offline consumer behavior due to the unique characteristics and interplay of technology and culture. Consumers in different countries with different ethnic origins not only use the internet for different purposes, but these different purposes may lead them to have different impressions of the same web sites (Chau et al. 2002).

Impact and utilitarian outcomes is one of the important factors in determining the level of technology use in the home. However, social and symbolic aspects of technology are important considerations in certain cultural conditions. Symbolic aspects of technology are relevant in certain high power distance countries when marketing their products (Shih et al. 2013).

Conceptual framework for this study

The study is about differences among the sales person's use of social media for personal work and professional work. Social media has impact on the sales force and consumer connect, inter-personal relations among the sales person as well as the social aspects of the life of sales person. Hence it is expected that the social media use impacts the sales performance of the sales force (Turnbull, Ford, and Cunningham 1996). The literature review provides many different conceptualizations of the same. For this research, the focus is on the conceptualizations which are broad and can be applied in most business contexts. Hence the following approach is used:

Social media usage can be broadly classified to be used for professional and personal use by the sales force (Garrett & Danziger 2008). Since the total use of the time is for either professional or personal work, checking only one proportion is good enough make the inference about both. However, in case self reported data is used for analysis, it might be a good idea to check for them separately.

There are generational differences in the use of social media technology among the different age groups. It is expected that younger people are more likely to use, and feel more comfortable in using social media (Marshall et al 2012, Schultz, Schwepker and Good 2012).

There is network effect which operates in social media. Hence, the more popular the social media is with the sales force as well as customers, the more would be its value and consequent use. Also, the proliferation of social media is dependent on the access to technology and its familiarity with the users.

Since national culture has impact on the technology usage, there is cultural specificity in such research. Thus, this research focuses on India, which is high on power distance, masculinity and long term orientation and low on individualism.

Based on the three conceptualizations, the following null hypotheses were developed:

H1a: There is no difference in the proportion of time spent by B2B sales force on social media for professional work in different stages of their career - measured by their age.

H1b: There is no difference in the proportion of time spent by B2B sales force on social media for personal work in different stages of their career - measured by their age.

H2a: There is no difference in the proportion of time spent by B2B sales force on social media for professional work in different stages of their career - measured by their experience.

H2b: There is no difference in the proportion of time spent by B2B sales force on social media for personal work in different stages of their career - measured by their experience.

H3a: There are no differences in the proportion of time spent on social media for professional work by the B2B sales force with respect to their performance.

H3b: There are no differences in the proportion of time spent on social media for professional work by the B2B sales force with respect to their performance.

H4a: There are no differences in the proportion of time spent on social media for professional work by the B2B sales force across the different types of cities they operate from.

H4b: There are no differences in the proportion of time spent on social media for personal work by the B2B sales force across the different types of cities they operate from.

Methodology

The social media behavior of the frontline B2B sales person was to be studied with respect to their performance, location and their stages of career, which could be in terms of age as well as experience. A survey instrument which measured the time spent by the sales force in professional and personal use, their location and their career stages was designed.

Getting the data filled in accurately from frontline sales force is a challenge in India, hence there was a need to select a site of data collection where data could be collected under managerial supervision. It was also important to get an all India perspective, from different classes of cities, and across the country. Hence, data was collected from the frontline sales force of a company which had pan India presence. A single multinational corporation with large field force, who sold to the retail outlets across India was considered. This ensured that the differences in the social media usage were not affected by the differences in the professional and organizational culture aspects of the sales force.

The questionnaire was sent to all the branch offices of the multinational corporation. The branch heads of those offices sent the questionnaire to the frontline sales team. A total of 254 filled in questionnaires were received out of which only 205 was found to be completely filled in and free from any obvious anomaly in its filling.

The data was coded and analyzed using SPSS 18 software and ANOVA analysis with post hoc tests was conducted to test the hypotheses.

Results

The results are given Table 1:

Table 1: Results

Hypotheses	F	P	Conclusion
H1a: There is no difference in the proportion of time spent by B2B sales force on social media for professional work in different stages of their career - measured by their age.	5,199 = 1.083	0.371	Supported
H1b: There is no difference in the proportion of time spent by B2B sales force on social media for personal work in different stages of their career - measured by their age.	5,199 = 6.905	0.000	Rejected
H2a: There is no difference in the proportion of time spent by B2B sales force on social media for professional work in different stages of their career - measured by their experience.	4,200 = 1.824	0.126	Supported
H2b: There is no difference in the proportion of time spent by B2B sales force on social media for personal work in different stages of their career - measured by their experience.	4,200 = 2.382	0.053	Supported
H3a: There are no differences in the proportion of time spent on social media for professional work by the B2B sales force with respect to their performance.	2,202 = 1.307	0.273	Supported
H3b: There are no differences in the proportion of time spent on social media for professional work by the B2B sales force with respect to their performance.	2,202 = 2.897	0.057	Supported
H4a: There are no differences in the proportion of time spent on social media for professional work by the B2B sales force across the different types of cities they operate from.	3,201 = 1.486	0.219	Supported
H4b: There are no differences in the proportion of time spent on social media for personal work by the B2B sales force across the different types of cities they operate from.	3,201 = 7.348	0.000	Rejected

Discussion

The empirical evidence is quite clear that there are differences in the social media usage for personal work by B2B sales force with respect to age and the different types of cities only. There is no difference with respect to professional use, or their number of years of work experience or performance. There is need to understand the overall trend as well as deep dive into each of the hypotheses to uncover the actual drivers behind the results.

Results of hypotheses 1a and 1b, when seen together essentially means that for sales force in different age groups, there are no difference in the proportion of time spent in social media for professional work but there are differences in proportion of time used in personal use. There is some difference due to age of the sales person in their social media usage, at least with respect to personal work. It raises the question, why the effect of age is not seen in social media use for professional work? Since the data was taken from the sales force of one single company, one way to comprehend this result is that the usage of social media for professional use is driven by formal or informal organizational norms, culture and demands, which makes everyone behave in a particular manner as far as professional use is considered.

Thus no difference in the use of social media for professional work was observed with respect to age, while personal usage is driven by the individual choices and hence difference was observed for personal use. One corollary of the result could be that marketers in organizations are driving sales performance by using social media effectively for building interaction and dependencies between buyer and sellers, as suggested by Turnbull, Ford, and Cunningham (1996). Thus the companies have institutionalized and standardized the social media interactions between buyer and sellers effectively, so that use of social media is uniform across the sales force, though the performance varies due to

other extraneous variables. However, this result is likely to be observed when the sales force is from the same company and may not be valid for studies across companies as network of relationships surrounding a company shows little consistency between companies, interactions in their various relationships (Turnbull, Ford & Cunningham 1996).

Results of hypotheses 2a, 2b, 3a and 3b clearly points to the fact that proportion of time used by B2B sales force for personal and professional use does not change irrespective of the differences in number years of work experience or their performance levels. The way to understand this result is that use of social media usage is not at all driven by the number of years of work experience or performance level, it is driven mostly by professional and not personal variables, most critical one of which was age.

Results of hypotheses 4a and 4b, when seen together essentially means that for sales force in different cities, there are no difference in the proportion of time spent in social media for professional work but there are differences in proportion of time used in personal use. There is some difference due to location of the sales force in their social media usage, at least with respect to personal work. It raises the question, why the effect of location is not seen in social media use for professional work? The way to comprehend this result is also in the same line as was the argument with age, that the usage of social media for professional use is driven by formal or informal organizational norms, culture and demands, which makes everyone behave in a particular manner as far as professional use is considered, irrespective of their location. Thus no difference in the use of social media for professional work was observed with respect to location, while personal usage of social media is driven by the number of people in the personal circle who use this method, the personal nature etc. and hence difference was observed for proportion of time spent on social media for personal use.

So it is possible to conclude that the age and the location of the B2B sales person has an impact on the proportion of time they use in personal use of social media, while the number of years of experience and the performance level has no impact. However, the proportion of time they use in use of social media professional work, did not depend on age, location, number of years of experience and the performance level of the sales person. It is possible that the impact of age and location on social media usage for professional work was only governed by the organizational work processes and flows and requirements.

One reason that could also explain the differences in social media use by frontline sales force due to age; is the differences in the ability to adopt a new technology, which changes with age as well as the relevant peer group. Since social media use for personal use depend on the peer group, the younger people are likely to have a peer group who are young and are quick to adopt new technology. Thus, due to network effect, the value of the social media is more for younger people. The same logic is applicable for location, where the location has impact on the development of the social media ecosystem in terms of the devices and network.

Limitations of the study and areas of further research

The limitations are essentially in the area of conceptualization and data. As far as conceptualization, this research assumes that the technological ecosystem that supports the social media is similar across the country, which may not be the case, specially with respect to network infrastructure and technology adoption proclivity. Also, the number of people with whom one interacts in the personal space for social media may be a very important contributor to the time spent, which has not been addressed in this research.

As far as data is concerned, this study was essentially done on a single B2B organization, hence the impact of the organizational processes, culture, and intermediaries had an impact on the findings. Though the study was about only the differences, this study needs to be replicated in many more organizations to make a firm conclusion.

The sample was collected from all India, but the process had not taken care of non-response bias. A stratified random sampling technique would have made the sample more representative of all India population and improved the applicability of the results.

The sample size of 205 was good for the tests being conducted, but more data sets would have improved the robustness of the results.

Finally, the data was self reported, more controlled quasi experiments could be designed which measured the exact amount of time spent on the social media and the exact performance levels of the corresponding sales force.

Thus, future work could be done using actual data for the time used, control for the number of people in the social network, the number of people on professional network.

The usage of social media for professional relationship building and use as well as personal use is driven by formal or informal organizational norms, culture and demands which makes everyone behave in a particular manner as far as professional use is considered. This conjecture needs to be tested empirically by comparing the link between social media use and sales force performance of different companies.

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