

# AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS SELLING: SALESPERSON CHARACTERISTICS, ACTIVITIES AND PERFORMANCE

*ROBERTA J. SCHULTZ, Western Michigan University*  
*CHARLES H. SCHWEPKER, University of Central Missouri*  
*DAVID J. GOOD, Grand Valley State University*

---

*Despite the evolution of social media and its increasingly significant impact on the marketing environment, research examining how social media relates to the critical area of sales is lacking. To create an improved framework of the strategic usage of social media, this paper presents a profile of B2B sales professionals who employ social media. Importantly, the results reveal salespeople who use social media typically have key differences from sales professionals who don't utilize this tool. Users of social media have discovered social media impacts overall sales performance. While the study found users of social media are typically from younger generations, this age dynamic creates interesting implications for managers desiring to integrate this tool into their strategic marketing mix. This study therefore advances the sales literature in the understanding of social media as a strategic sales tool that influences sales performance.*

---

## INTRODUCTION

Social media technology has been accepted as part of the marketing strategy and culture of operations within a variety of companies. For example, searches of employment data bases regularly demonstrate marketers are using social media as part of their strategic package, and are continuing to search for marketing professionals to start and manage these programs. The growth of tools such as Twitter and Facebook underscores that social media is becoming a mainstream strategy for many marketers.

Social media has seen the most exposure in consumer markets, yet business-to-business (B2B) marketers have also expanded their efforts and are beginning to develop social media strategies. Thus, because of the uniqueness required to reach B2B target audiences via social channels, and its continued growth as a strategic choice, this study specifically focuses on the use of social media

within B2B sales. B2B buyer segments tend to be fundamentally distinctive from their business-to-consumer (B2C) counterparts. For instance, B2B buyers purchase products for their business and to fulfill their customers' needs. These buyers face higher risk in higher value sales, making it important to have information that allows for the "best decision." There is a tendency for smaller niche markets with fewer vendor options (Hansen, 2012), creating a need for lengthy, close relationships with more vendor contact points than in consumer markets. As a result, social media holds enormous potential for companies to become more connected to clients and, by doing so, increase revenue, reduce costs and improve efficiencies. Yet, despite the structure of the marketplace, the utilization of social media for reaching business-to-business clients is a relatively new phenomenon and has gone largely unexplored in the literature.

It is interesting that 99% of surveyed business managers believe social media will have a significant impact on their business yet almost two-thirds report they are not sure of its meaning (Safko, 2011). The power of social media is expected to impact marketing and

sales, and as noted by Seley and Holloway (2008), this will require a cultural overhaul. In an environment where numerous businesses offer similar products and services while maintaining similar values, the salesperson has an opportunity to provide unique advantages through social media that are particularly useful in the B2B marketplace. For example, blogs may be used by salespeople to leverage industry knowledge and influence sales, while Twitter can be used to seek out new business opportunities and build professional relationships. Salespeople who participate in such methods should be able to improve business by helping build customer loyalty, reducing support costs, fostering additional sales opportunities, and providing an additional customer feedback loop (Hansen, 2012).

Evidence of the incorporation of social media into sales in B2B firms demonstrates its importance. For example, Sanbolic Inc. provides clients with distributed data management software for critical enterprise workloads, virtual desktop infrastructure and cloud computing deployments through a network of value-added resellers. Management at Sanbolic has shifted their strategy to provide their partners, customers, resellers and prospects with educational materials via blog posts, and is automatically tweeting to connected LinkedIn accounts which are tied to Salesforce.com for tracking, resulting in increased leads stemming from building credibility and trust (Bannan, 2011). GridGain Systems provides a Java-based cloud application development platform. GridGain found its technical customers responded through the personal connection capability provided by Twitter to exchange ideas and links, resulting in a 20% increase in Web traffic (Bannan, 2011). IBM has successfully studied the exact language that IT buyers used in their searches about software topics and then custom designed instructional videos which resulted in sales leads (Baird and Parasnis, 2011). Molex Inc., a manufacturer of connectors for use in electronics, utilizes blogs, Twitter, and YouTube to extend its sales opportunities overseas (Callahan, 2012).

Combining the literature and practitioner applications, this study analyzes differences between B2B salesperson users and nonusers of social media. The research provides management with an understanding of differences between these two groups. The next section will provide proposed hypotheses, followed by a discussion of the research method and results. Finally, managerial implications, study limitations and directions for future research are offered to advance knowledge of social media for the sales and social media literatures.

## RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

### Social Media Usage in Critical Sales Activities

Social media is any tool or service that uses the Internet to facilitate conversations. Given sales rests on exchanging information between buyers and sellers, the process of facilitating conversations that exists within social media underscores its potentially critical relationship to sellers and its opportunity for strategic usage by the sales organization. The basis of sales social media can be defined relative to conventional advertising on television and in magazines in that traditional marketing media offers a mass media method of interacting with customers, while social media offers more one-to-one methods to meet and interact with prospects and customers (Safko, 2011).

Curtis and Giamanco (2010) suggest there is a new sales approach that is more of a mindset change than using the latest technology. The goal of this approach is to embrace the appropriate technology that will best help create efficiency and effectiveness in the sales operation. The contention is that social selling allows sellers to attract, interact and close business with buyers. When properly managed, these inexpensive social media tools can quickly deliver marketing messages through interactive discussion and rapid word of mouth which can create measurable results (Owyang, 2009).

There are important selling activities that B2B salespeople engage in every day (Ingram et al., 2012). They obtain leads, build awareness, prospect, maintain good business relationships, obtain referrals to other potential prospects, communicate thoroughly, and connect with customers to keep them feeling important. The research question that remains to be answered in this environment is if social media is being applied to these selling activities. While definitive conclusions remain unclear about specific usage, the literature about social media usage indicates that it may be used in early stages of a customer relationship where awareness, lead building and prospecting take place (Curtis and Giamanco, 2010). While salespeople need to become adept at successfully navigating the first few critical phases of the sales process (i.e., investigating and qualifying prospects), it appears social networking might save considerable time during this aspect of the sales cycle (Seley and Holloway, 2008).

Business social networking tools such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Hootsuite, Foursquare and Twitter could be used to maintain relationships with customers and identify potential leads (Safko, 2011). Better information leads to better qualification of sales opportunities, suggesting social media can be used for established customers to maintain positive business relationships and retain necessary communication. Additionally, the expectation that salespeople may use social media such as Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. as a path to ask for referrals to other prospects, leads to the first hypothesis:

- H<sub>1</sub>:** B2B sales users of social media are more likely than not to use social media to maintain good business relationships,
- (a) obtain leads,
  - (b) build awareness,
  - (c) connect with customers and keep them feeling important,
  - (d) prospect,
  - (e) obtain referrals to other potential prospects, and
  - (f) communicate thoroughly.

The importance in understanding this hypothesis from a practitioner or academic view rests with the idea that before a tool can be successfully integrated into an organization, managers must understand who uses the tool, and how it is utilized. Understanding this hypothesis ensures social media is not simply implemented, but its usage is maximized and the greatest organizational value of usage is realized. For example, if this study determines social media enhances relationships between buyers and sellers, it can be strategically included in relationship building programs incorporated by salespeople.

### Social media Usage and Sales Performance

Marketing executives from Inc. 500 companies report that social media tools are important for brand awareness, company reputation, generating web traffic, lead generation and customer support programs (Barnes and Lescault, 2012). They indicate they use and have had overall marketing success with tools such as message/bulletin boards, blogging, mobile apps, online video, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, Texting, Facebook, Podcasting, and Foursquare (Barnes and Lescault, 2012). The platform most utilized is Facebook with 74% of companies using it. Virtually tied at 73% is the adoption of the professional network LinkedIn. Approximately a quarter of the managers studied report that Facebook or LinkedIn is the single most effective social networking platform they use.

Specifically, in the B2B arena, a fundamental shift in the method that buyers and sellers communicate has occurred, requiring salespeople to adapt their process and approach. In B2B buying exchanges, the sales cycle is built on relationships and trust, often established through face-to-face interaction. Yet, in a social sales world, B2B buying decisions frequently initiate, move forward and are often closed online or over the phone with limited face-to-face meetings. In this environment, salespeople must recognize, participate in and leverage the emphasis that buyers now place on recommendations,

comments and the reviews of others (Seley, 2011).

While the research addressing social media usage in B2B sales is lagging behind that of marketing in general, it appears social media usage in the sales function is important, particularly if its usage can be linked to sales outcomes. In a similar framework, Robinson et al. (2005) tested a model linking technology acceptance to adaptive selling and job performance of field salespeople. They provided evidence that behavioral intentions to use technology positively affect salesperson performance. Onyemah et al. (2010) also confirmed that usage of sales technology has a positive influence on salesperson performance, and a broad study of sellers from the U.S., U.K., Brazil and China found social media has become critical to achievement, with the most successful salespeople reporting social media being integral to sales success (Fetherstonhaugh, 2010). Given that social media is perceived by salespeople to improve their success, coupled with the positive relationship between sales technology and salesperson performance, we propose:

- H<sub>2</sub>:** B2B salespeople who use social media are more likely than nonusers to perceive that social media improves their sales success.
- H<sub>3</sub>:** B2B salespeople who use social media have higher levels of overall sales performance than nonusers.

The importance of these hypotheses to researchers and practitioners both focus on why someone would (or would not) utilize social media. The specific importance of H2 determines if any bias exists in who is likely to utilize social media, which could restrict the ability of a marketing organization to utilize this tool. For example, if nonusers are not likely to perceive social media will improve their individual performance, this allows managers to understand that the implementation of any social media tools may be restricted or “fought” by nonusers who simply don’t believe in its success. Findings from testing the third hypothesis (H3) underscore that if social media

actually enhances performance, it in turn should be a valued strategic effort by management.

### **Social Media Usage and Generational Differences**

As social media technologies are used in business-to-business sales environments, questions will continue as we attempt to understand human factors that impede or generate its success. One such factor that may explain social media usage is generational impact. Understanding generational differences may assist managers in adopting new technologies that appeal to each generation (Marston, 2011), and in turn, recognizing how these generational differences impact business is important (Bartley, Ladd and Morris, 2007; Kritz and Arsenault, 2006; Walker, 2003).

Currently, there are three distinct generations in today’s salesforce: Millennials born 1980 to 1993, Generation Xers born 1965 to 1979, and Baby boomers born 1946 to 1964. Millennials constitute the bulk of the potential replacement labor (Bartlett, 2005). They are entering the salesforce in large numbers and they play by different rules (Howe and Strauss, 2000). A key question we often hear is do the youngest members of today’s salesforce differ considerably from their predecessors?

Among Millennials who see their generation as unique, technology use is a response that separates them from other groups. Millennials see their generation as unique in their ability to understand and use technology. Roughly a quarter (24%) of those surveyed who were under age 30 say technology is what sets their generation apart (Abate 2010). Examples of social media usage in sales are occurring at industrial giant General Electric, where Millennials helped create a social media presence through sites such as Pinterest and Instagram (Callahan, 2012). Millennials are helping other B2B companies such as CREE and Mandiant Corporation to go from literally no social media presence to surpassing companies 100 times their size, such as RSA and Symantec, in terms of Klout Score and

other metrics (Callahan, 2012). Marketing executives are finding that this younger generation's social media expertise and easy familiarity with the digital world make them particularly valuable employees.

Yet, despite anecdotal evidence referencing high usage patterns, research has not addressed the connection between generations and the usage of social media in B2B sales. There have, however, been studies exploring whether or not generations will determine the use of technology (three studies found no evidence of a direct relationship). For example, Hunter and Perreault (2007) found salesperson experience shared no direct relationship with using technology to access, analyze or communicate. Similarly, Ko and Dennis (2004), Johnson and Whitehorn (1997) and Mathieu, Ahearne and Taylor (2007) failed to find a significant relationship between age (and experience) and technology use. Older salespeople see technology as offering both advantages and presenting complexities (Speier and Venkatesh, 2002), and boomers tend to see themselves as open to new technology and will use it if they can see its value (Glass, 2007).

Several studies have concluded younger salespeople tend to use technology more than older salespeople (Harris and Pike, 1996; Hunter and Perreault, 2006; Rapp, Ahearne and Forbes, 2007; Senecal, Pullins and Bueher, 2007). Not surprisingly, because Millennials already use social media in their personal lives, it is expected that they will push for their corporate learning experiences to employ them as well (Cisco, 2011). Cisco, for example, revealed that one in three young professionals consider the Internet to be as important as fundamental human resources such as air, water, food and shelter (Cisco, 2011). These and numerous other findings provide insight into the mindset, expectations, and behavior of the world's next generation of workers and the increased likelihood that these salespeople will want to incorporate social media in their sales efforts. It may be that younger salespeople will be more comfortable with technology than Boomers (Lancaster and Stillman, 2003) and

that the newer generations of salespeople will have shorter learning curves, and higher levels of technology tools usage (Delvecchio, 2009). Boomers thus far may have been resistant to adopting social media due to issues described in the technology acceptance model (TAM) (Davis, 1989; Davis, Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1989), and some salespeople may be threatened or not clear about the benefits of new technology (Curran and Meuter, 2005). Equally, there are salespeople who will consider the costs of learning new technology, and switching to using it, to be too great to be worthwhile (Gatignon and Robertson 1991). Hence, although the evidence is mixed, the predominant view suggests that

**H<sub>4</sub>:** B2B users of social media are more likely than nonusers to be Millennials or Generation Xers. Nonusers are more likely to be Baby Boomers.

The practical and research importance of H<sub>4</sub> rests with providing a more in-depth understanding of comprises sales users of social media in the B2B marketplace. Through an understanding of the generational compartments most likely to employ such tools, marketers can gather a better understanding of how to integrate social media into their own organization as part of their strategic package. Equally important, these findings are likely to provide indirect information about buyers who use social media. From that information, sellers can craft strategies designed to use (or not use) specific social media efforts among different ages of buyers.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample and Data Collection

A leading data collection organization was used to administer a national electronic mail survey of business-to-business sales professionals. An email was sent to salespeople in this organization's database inviting them to participate in the survey. As a result, 1,989 sales professionals accessed our electronic survey via the Web. An initial screening

question was used to determine if respondents were a business-to-business salesperson. This eliminated 1,680 respondents, leaving 309 respondents to continue with the survey. After examining the data for incomplete responses, a final sample of 273 remained. A time-trend extrapolation test (Armstrong and Overton, 1977) using demographic, classification and measurement variables was performed to estimate nonresponse bias. Results ( $F = 1.22$ , significance  $F = 0.270$ ) suggest that nonresponse bias is not likely a problem.

The sample consists of mostly males (60.1%) who average 43.3 years of age. The study includes 21.2% (aged 18-31; born 1980 to 1993) Millennials, 35.9% Generation X (aged 32-46; born 1965 to 1979) and 42.9% Baby Boomers (aged 47-65; born 1946 to 1964). Respondents average 17.9 years of sales experience and most (67.8%) have a college degree. Respondents report their primary means of compensation as salary (42.1%), commission (21.2%) or a combination of salary, commission and bonus (36.7%). These salespeople sell for services (45.4%), wholesaling (25.6%), manufacturing (26.4%), and nonprofit (2.6%) organizations in a variety of industries.

### Operationalization of Study Variables

To determine respondents' *social media usage* (SMU), they were asked to respond using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (7) "strongly agree" to the following statement, "I use social media for selling." Those who responded with a 1, 2 or 3 were classified as nonusers of social media ( $N = 110$ ), while those who responded with a 5, 6 or 7 were classified as social media users ( $N = 115$ ).

The extent to which salespeople believe that *social media improves sales success* (SMSS) was based on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (7) "strongly agree" using an average of two items: "I feel social media is important to my success in

sales" and "Social media has helped increase my sales."

*Sales performance* (SP) was measured as an average of seven items (shown in Table 1) intended to assess the extent to which salespeople achieve their sales objectives. Using a scale ranging from (1) "much worse" to (5) "much better", salespeople rated their current level of performance by evaluating how well they believe they performed on seven performance items relative to other salespeople in their organization at the time of their last performance review. Originally developed from Behrman and Perreault's (1982) "achieving objectives" dimension of their performance measure, this scale, or a slight variation of it (i.e., one item more or less), has been used frequently to measure sales performance (e.g., Evans et al., 2007; Jaramillo et al. 2009).

*Social media sales activities* (SMSA) were measured with seven items (shown in Table 2) on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (7) "strongly agree." Respondents indicated as "users" of social media who answered 1, 2, or 3 were grouped as not using social media for the specific sales activity, while those who answered 5, 6, or 7 were considered to be users of social media for that sales activity.

*Generations* was determined by grouping respondents into three categories based on their age. Respondents aged 18-31 are classified as Millennials, those aged 32-46 make up Generation Xers, and those aged 47 to 65 comprise the Baby Boomers.

Both the reliability and validity of the two measurement scales utilized in this study were assessed. Cronbach's (1951) coefficient alpha is .93 for SMSS, and .90 for sales performance indicating that each measure is reliable (Nunnally, 1978).

The convergent and discriminant validity of the measures was assessed via confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 16 (Arbuckle, 2007).

The fit statistics indicate that the model fits the data well ( $X^2 = 70.07$ ,  $df = 26$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ; CFI = .968, TLI = .956, RMSEA = .079). Table 1 summarizes results from the confirmatory factor analysis. Evidence of convergent validity is found in the statistically significant t-values (greater than 2.0) for the parameter estimates (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The findings also show that the proportion of variation in the indicators captured by the underlying construct is higher than the variance due to measurement error, offering additional support for convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981). For each construct, the average variance extracted exceeds a suggested critical value of .50 (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

Discriminant validity is evidenced by the finding that the average variance extracted by each construct is greater than the shared variance between the two constructs (shared variance = 0.04) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Furthermore, evidence of discriminant validity is offered by the fact that the two constructs are distinguishable from one another given that the 95 percent confidence interval for the correlation between the constructs does not

contain the value of 1.0 (confidence interval = -0.14 to 0.22) (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

**Analysis and Results**

To assess hypothesis one, only users of social media were considered. Support is provided for H<sub>1</sub> (see Table 2) confirming that social media is more likely to be used than not with regards to each critical sales activity. The activities were ranked based on the highest percentage of users who agreed they use social media for that sales activity. The results indicate that social media is used by 91.8% to maintain good business relationships, 91.1% to obtain leads, 90.4% to build awareness, 88.9% to connect with customers and keep them feeling important, 86.0% to prospect, 84.2% to communicate thoroughly and 84.0% to obtain referrals to other potential prospects .

T-tests and Chi-square analyses were conducted to test the remaining hypotheses. Comparisons were made between those B2B salespeople who indicated they used social media and those who indicated that they did not use social media.

**TABLE 1:  
Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results**

Variable	Factor Loading	t-value	Average Variance Extracted
<i>Social Media Sales Success</i>			0.87
I feel social media is important to my success in sales	0.97	----- <sup>a</sup>	
Social media has helped increase my sales	0.89	5.73	
<i>Sales Performance</i>			0.56
Contribution to your company's market share	0.80	----- <sup>a</sup>	
Selling high profit margin products	0.72	12.62	
Generating a high level of dollar sales	0.84	15.40	
Quickly generating sales of new company products	0.70	12.20	
Identifying and cultivating major accounts in your territory	0.60	10.13	
Exceeding sales targets	0.77	13.84	
Assisting your sales supervisor in meeting his or her goals	0.80	14.39	

**TABLE 2:**  
**Social Media Sales Activities (SMSA)**

H <sub>1</sub> :	<u>Percent of social media users:</u>		<u>X<sup>2</sup></u>	<u>P-value</u>
	<u>*Disagreed</u>	<u>agreed</u>		
“I use social media in my selling efforts to:”				
maintain good business relationships.	8.2%	91.8%	68.61	0.000**
obtain leads.	8.9	91.1	68.21	0.000**
build awareness.	9.6	90.4	61.45	0.000**
connect with customers and keep them feeling important.	11.1	88.9	59.89	0.000**
prospect.	14.0	86.0	48.27	0.000**
obtain referrals to other potential prospects	15.8	84.2	44.47	0.000**
Communicate thoroughly.	16.0	84.0	46.24	0.000**

\*Only users were included n = 115

**X<sup>2</sup> analysis** -Comparison made between those who reported 1, 2, or 3 = “disagreed to using activity” vs. 5, 6, or 7 = “agreed to using activity”

\* p ≤ 0.05; \*\* p ≤ 0.001

**TABLE 3:**  
**Hypothesized Differences of Business-to-Business Salespeople Social Media Nonusers vs. Users**

	<u>Non-users</u>		<u>Users</u>			
I use social media for selling - SMU	40.3%		42.1%			
	N = 110		N = 115			
<b><u>Hypothesis</u></b>	<b><u>Mean</u></b>	<b><u>SD</u></b>	<b><u>Mean</u></b>	<b><u>SD</u></b>	<b><u>t-Value</u></b>	<b><u>P-value</u></b>
H <sub>2</sub> : Social Media Sales Success -SMSS	1.79	1.01	<b>5.35</b>	1.18	-24.36	0.000**
H <sub>3</sub> : Sales Performance - SP	3.75	0.71	<b>4.05</b>	0.58	-3.54	0.000**
	<b><u>Percent</u></b>		<b><u>Percent</u></b>		<b><u>X<sup>2</sup></u></b>	<b><u>P-value</u></b>
H <sub>4</sub> : Generational Differences						
Millennials	27.1		<b>72.9</b>		24.57	0.000**
Generation X	40.2		<b>59.8</b>			
Baby Boomers	<b>67.4</b>		32.6			
<b><u>Pairs Comparison</u></b>						
Millennials vs. Boomers					20.82	0.000**
Generation Xers vs. Boomers					13.07	0.000**
Millennials vs. Generation Xers					2.29	0.130

**Bold** indicates higher values if SIGNIFICANT

\* p ≤ 0.05; \*\* p ≤ 0.001

The results of hypotheses two through five are summarized in Table 3.

As anticipated in hypothesis two, users (Mean = 5.35, sd = 1.18) of social media are more likely than nonusers (Mean = 1.79, sd = 1.01) to believe that social media directly improves sales success ( $t = -24.36$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). In addition, support for hypothesis three was found. Users (Mean = 4.05, sd = 0.58) of social media showed higher levels of overall sales performance than nonusers (Mean = 3.75, sd = 0.71) ( $t = -3.54$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Finally, hypothesis four proposing that younger generations are more likely than Baby Boomers to be social media users is supported with a significant overall Chi square ( $X^2 = 24.57$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Millennials (72.9%) had a higher percentage of social media users than Baby Boomers (32.6%) ( $X^2 = 20.82$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Similarly, Generation Xers (59.8 %) are more likely to use social media than Baby Boomers ( $X^2 = 13.07$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). However, no statistically significant differences exist between the two youngest generations, Millennials and Generation Xers with regards to social media usage.

### Discussion and Managerial Implications

This study allows managers and researchers to develop an initial understanding of how social media is being utilized at the salesforce operational level. While attention is being given to the strategic, academic and practical usage of social media, knowledge about its usage by salespeople remains very limited, and mostly observational. Importantly, business-to-business salespeople were selected to investigate in this study because relational selling has become a growing strategic component of the marketing structure within this marketplace. As a result, client connectivity and the retention of clients through enhanced communications with buyers (the foundation of social media) provide an excellent opportunity to study the application of this marketing strategy by salespeople.

The significance of hypothesis one underscores the application of social media to sales

activities that are critical for most sellers (Geiger and Finch 2011) such as client relationship establishment, client retention and ongoing relationship building actions. The majority of social media users in this study indicate they use social media in different stages of the sales process. For instance, social media is used in early stages of a customer relationship where awareness, lead building and prospecting take place. A total of 88.9% of respondents indicated they employ social media to connect with customers, while 91.8% indicated they apply social media to established customers to maintain good business relationships and important communications. It was found that 84.0% of the B2B salespeople make use of social media such as Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. as a path to ask for referrals to other potential prospects. Hence, these B2B sellers use social media for common, but important aspects of the sales job. Sellers who understand how to use social media, therefore, are likely to be able to determine the most appropriate contact method(s) (traditional or social media) to enhance desired outcomes. From an organizational perspective, this finding suggests that selling organizations may need to explore how to include social media as part of their training programs and management development programs. If social media is able for example, to enhance client relationships, selling organizations would be wise to incorporate this tool as part of their overall efforts, and not allow its usage to be piecemeal among salespeople.

In hypothesis two, B2B professionals who already use this tool have a perception that it improves their success. This also indicates that nonusers are more likely to not believe in its success, and in turn, suggests management will find it more difficult to install social media programs in organizations or among marketers if usage does not already exist. Equally, it will likely be easier to begin social media programs where usage has already begun. Hence, if an organization is considering beginning such social media programs, it seems reasonable to begin to hire and strategically place salespeople who are already users of social media. Related

to this issue, hypothesis three found that salespeople who utilize social media are likely to experience higher levels of overall sales performance than those who do not use social media. These findings suggest that management can send signals of levels of support for salespeople through resource commitments directed specifically to social media activities. Therefore, business-to-business salespeople will see social media as not just a tool for personal social involvement, but as a way to improve productivity, which in turn means support should grow to provide resources to sellers such as training in its usage, software designed to assist in its usage by salespeople, and social media mentors assigned to the salesforce. B2B marketers will need to realize their existing and potential salespeople may be more attracted to firms that demonstrate support for such sales tools. When managers provide (or do not provide) social media organizational support, these actions send signals of a firm's willingness and level of support to assist the salespeople in obtaining sales objectives (quotas).

The findings revealed in hypothesis four indicate social media is being mostly utilized by younger workers who have likely developed these skills from their personal usage. This is disconcerting given the positive relationship found between using social media across various selling activities and sales performance, and the large number of older workers who are not using social media. Fetherstonhaugh (2010) reported that only a small percentage (approximately nine percent) of salespeople indicate they are being trained by their own firms in the use of social media for sales. This suggests there is a gap between what is needed and provided in terms of social media training. Salespeople who do not receive professional development are not likely to utilize such technical tools to enrich their positions.

Organizations who seek social media skills are going to have to make decisions as to how their personnel will receive the knowledge to utilize social media. For instance, will they train salespeople on the usage of social media, or

accept that the usage of social media will be limited to certain (younger) employees, and perhaps seek recruits who already have social media skills? GE for example is harnessing the digital know-how of Millennials with a "reverse mentoring" program in which executives are mentored by a Millennial who teaches them about social media and other elements of the interactive world (Callahan, 2012).

It seems practical that organizations would want to customize their social media tools to reflect their own customers, salespeople, and marketplace. Such an approach, suggests that simply "buying employees with previous skills" may have limited long-term appeal for many sales organizations.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

By restricting the sample to only B2B salespeople, this study was able to reduce extraneous sources of variability and test for differences related to social media usage. To some degree this may lend credence to the importance of these specific distinctions. However, the study does not pretend to address all of the challenges of social media usage in the sales environment. There are other legitimate constructs that could be included to provide a more complete understanding of these complex issues.

This study was one of the first to empirically compare B2B salespeople on their perceptions of usage and importance of social media in the sales arena. It therefore provides an initial understanding of workforce differences to the sales management literature, as well as suggests applications to the broader marketing literature. Considerable opportunities exist to expand the investigation to foster a wider perspective of the marketing usage of social media. For instance, as social media becomes more widely integrated into sales, it is important to determine the qualities of customers who embrace the usage of social media in building relationships, how they see the construction of such relationships and their perceptions of what

comprises a successful social media relationship.

Statistically significant differences between social media users and nonusers uncovered in this study offer important insights. As an exploratory study, this work highlights the importance of supplementary research in this area. Development of multi-item multidimensional constructs could prove useful in such analysis. As a result, these variables could then be assessed with other critical sales performance issues (e.g., customer-oriented selling -Saxe and Weitz, 1982), in addition to manager and seller impacts on salesforce outcomes and the use of technology (e.g., Mathieu, Ahearne and Taylor, 2007).

The findings of this research indicate social media is being used and that it helps contribute to increases in sales. Future research could be expanded to explore additional challenges and opportunities that may arise from the use of this new technology. Future research should attempt to examine the underlying facets of salespeople's perception that social media improves their success. It would also be helpful to analyze specific differentials between social media users and nonusers. For instance, do the users of social media prospect more

efficiently? Are they the recipients of more referrals? Table 4 provides several research questions that remain to be answered.

In conclusion, managerial and research implications indicate the value of this topic. Future research into new constructs can extend the understanding of how social media usage impacts important workplace actions and decisions. Thus, if properly positioned, social media technologies clearly represent opportunities to enhance new and meaningful approaches in sales. While social media is only at the beginning of its strategic lifecycle, it is important to determine how marketers can best integrate these tools into existing (e.g., relationship building) and new strategic efforts as skills, technologies, customers, and sales organizations evolve.

## REFERENCES

- Abate, T. (2010). Survey reveals millennial attitudes toward work. *SFGate*, (May 30). Available at [http://articles.sfgate.com/2010-05-30/business/21650783\\_1\\_millennials-united-kingdom-survey](http://articles.sfgate.com/2010-05-30/business/21650783_1_millennials-united-kingdom-survey).

**TABLE 4:**  
**Social Media in Sales: Future Research Questions**

- What objectives are executives and managers pursuing when they adopt social media, and how do these vary, if at all, across context?
- What counts as social media success (or failure) from the perspective of the various internal (salesperson, sales manager, senior manager) and external (vendor and customer) stakeholders?
- What impact does social media have on customers and on supplier–customer relationships?
- Which technology, people and process factors are important components of social media implementations, and what impact do they have on outcomes?
- Does social media deliver competitive advantage and, if so, is the advantage sustainable?
- When should salespeople get involved in social media, and to what extent?
- What combination of social media tools (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube, Foursquare and Yelp) should be used?
- What training and resource strategies are required to implement a social media strategy?
- How does social media usage make salespeople more effective or efficient?

- Anderson, J. C. & Gerbing, D. W. (1988). Structural equation modeling in practice: A review and recommended two-step approach. *Psychological Bulletin*, 103 (May), 411-23.
- Arbuckle, J. L. (2007). *Amos 16.0 User's Guide*, Spring House, PA: Amos Development Corporation.
- Armstrong, J. S. & Overton, T. S. (1977). Estimating nonresponse bias in mail surveys. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 14 (August), 396-402.
- Baird, C. H. & Parasnis, G. (2011). From social media to social customer relationship management. *Strategy & Leadership*, 39 (5), 30-37.
- Bannan, K. J. (2011). Sanbolic gets social and leads multiply. *btobonline.com*, (June 21).
- Barnes, N. G. & Lescault, A. M. (2012). The 2011 Inc. 500 social media update: Blogging declines as newer tools rule. University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research, (January 30).
- Bartlett, M. (2005). Generation X? So old school. the emphasis now is on the 'millennials.' *The Credit Union Journal*, May 9, 14.
- Bartley, S. J., Patrick G. L. & Morris, M. L. (2007). Managing the multigenerational workplace: Answers for managers and trainers. *CUPA-HR Journal*, (Spring/Summer), 28-34.
- Behrman, D. N., & Perreault, Jr., W. D. (1982). Measuring the performance of industrial salespersons. *Journal of Business Research*, 10 No. 3, 355-370.
- Callahan, S. (2012). Millennials add social savvy to marketing mix. *btobonline.com* (June 11).
- Cisco (2011). 2011 Cisco Connected World Technology Report, Available at <http://www.cisco.com/en/US/netsol/ns1120/index.html> (Accessed December 2011)
- Cronbach, L. J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and internal structure of tests. *Psychometrika*, 16 (September), 297-334.
- Curran, J. M. & Meuter, M. L. (2005). Self-service technology adoption: Comparing three technologies. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 19 (2), 103-113.
- Curtis, J. C. & Giamanco, B. (2010). *The New Handshake: Sales Meets Social Media*. Praeger. ABC-CLIO, LLC, Santa Barbara, CA.
- Davis, F. D. (1989). Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology. *MIS Quarterly*, 13, 318-339.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Bagozzi, R. P. & Warshaw, P. R. (1989). User acceptance of computer technology: A comparison of two theoretical models. *Management Science*, 35 (8), 982-1003.
- Delvecchio, S. (2009). Baby boomers and generation X industrial salespeople: Generational divide or convergence? *The Journal of Applied Business Research*, 25, (5 September/October), 69-84.
- Evans, K. R., Landry, T. D. Li, P. & Zou, S. (2007). How sales controls affect job-related outcomes: The role of organizational sales-related psychological climate perceptions. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 35 (Fall), 445-59.
- Fetherstonhaugh, B. (2010). The future of selling: It's social, companies aren't adapting quickly enough. *Forbes* (December 3), <http://www.forbes.com/2010/12/03/future-of-selling-leadership-sales-leadership-Ogilvy-one.html>
- Fornell, C. & Larcker, D. F. (1981). Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 18 (February), 39-50.
- Gatignon, H. & Robertson, T. S. (1991). *Innovative decision processes* in Robertson, T.S. and Kassarian, H.H. (Eds). *Handbook of Consumer Behavior*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Geiger, S. & Finch, J. (2011). Buyer-seller interactions in mature industrial markets: Blurring the relational-transactional selling dichotomy. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* (summer) 31 (3), 255-268.

- Glass, A. (2007). Understanding generational differences for competitive success. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 39, (2), 98-103.
- Hansen, L. (2012). "Social media for B2B: A beginner's guide - ebook. *Radian6 Technologies Community*, (July) <http://www.radian6.com>.
- Harris, K. & Pike, J. (1996). Issues concerning adoption and use of sales force automation in the agricultural input supply sector. *Agribusiness*, 12 (4), 317-326.
- Howe, N. & Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials rising: The next great generations*. Vintage Books, Random House, New York, NY.
- Hunter, G. K. & Perreault, Jr., W. D. (2006). Sales technology orientation, information effectiveness and sales performance. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 26 (2), 95-113.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and Perreault, Jr., W. D. (2007). Making sales technology effective. *Journal of Marketing*, 71 (1), 16-34.
- Ingram, T. N., LaForge, R. W., Avila, R. Schwepker, Jr., C. H. & Williams, W. (2012). *Sales Management: Analysis and Decision Making*. 8th ed., M.E. Sharpe, Inc.
- Jaramillo, Fernando; Grisaffe, Douglas B; Chonko, L. B. & Roberts, J. A. (2009). Examining the impact of servant leadership on sales force performance. *The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 29. 3 (Summer 2009): 257-276.
- Johnson, D. & Whitehorn, M. (1997). Justifying the use of portable computer technology by the salesforce of a large insurance company. *The Service Industries Journal*, 17 (3), 507-527.
- Ko, D. & Dennis, A. R. (2004). Sales force automation and sales performance: Do experience and expertise matter? *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 24, (4 Fall), 311-22.
- Kritz, G. H., & Arsenault, P. M. (2006). Teaching cohort analysis: An important marketing management tool. *Marketing Education Review*, 16 (Summer), 37-43.
- Lancaster, L. C. & Stillman, D. (2003). *When generations collide: Who they are. why they clash. How to solve the generational puzzle at work*. HarperCollins, Harper-Business, New York, NY.
- Maddox, K. (2011). Cisco engages customers with integrated social strategy. *btobonline.com*, (December 13).
- Marston, C. (2011). *Generational selling tactics that work*. Hoboken: Wiley.
- Mathieu, J., Ahearne, M. & Taylor, S. R. (2007). A longitudinal cross-level model of leader and salesperson influences on sales force technology use and performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92, (2), 528-37.
- Nunnally, J. C. (1978). *Psychometric Theory*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Onyemah, V., Swain, S. D., & Hanna, R. (2010). A social learning perspective on sales technology usage: Preliminary evidence from an emerging economy. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 30 (2 Spring), 131-142
- Owyang, J. K. (2009). Social media playtime is over. *Forrester Research, Inc.*, March 16.
- Rapp, A., Ahearne, M. & Forbes, L. P. (2007). Sales force technology adoption and performance: The role of career stages. *Academy of Marketing Science*, Summer Conference, Coral Gables, FL, (May), 24-26.
- Robinson, Jr., L., Marshall, G. W. & Stamps, M. B. (2005). An empirical investigation of technology acceptance in a field sales force setting. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 34 (4), 407-415.
- Safko, L. (2011). *The social media bible: Tactics, tools and strategies for business success*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Hoboken, NJ.
- Saxe, R. & Weitz, B. A. (1982). The SOCO scale: A measure of the customer orientation of salespeople. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 19 (August), 343-51.
- Seley, A. & Holloway, B. (2008). *Sales 2.0: Improve business results using innovative sales practices and technology* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons).

- \_\_\_\_\_ (2011), Social media and sales: Is anyone making quota using new media? *The Art of Social Sales*, Oracle.com.
- Senecal, S., Pullins, E. B. & Bueher, R. E. (2007). The extent of technology use and salespeople: An exploratory investigation. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 22, (1), 52-61.
- Speier, C. & Venkatesh, V. (2002). The hidden minefields in the adoption of sales force automation technologies. *Journal of Marketing*, 66, (July), 98-111.
- Walker, E. (2003). The value of generational marketing. *National Underwriter: Life & Health/Financial Services Edition*, (July 21), 24, 27.