

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SALES FORCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL COOPERATION AND TRAINING ON PERFORMANCE

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In this paper, the authors use hierarchical regression analysis to empirically test the antecedents and consequences of social media usage by sales forces. . Given the scant empirical evaluation of social media use in business-to-business relationships, this research analyzes a sample size of 1,699 respondents to aid in the understanding of several factors. Significant relationships between intra-organizational cooperation and social media usage are found, as well as a positive relationship between social media usage and sales performance. Furthermore, the moderating factor of training on social media's effect on performance is uncovered and provides important implications for how managers may best implement a firm's social media strategy among its sales force.

INTRODUCTION

Encouraging sales personnel to use available technological resources during the sales process continues to be an ongoing concern for practitioners and academics. Over the past decade, a large body of research in the sales and marketing areas has emerged examining the antecedents and consequences of technology adoption by a sales force. Researchers have used a number of theoretical perspectives including self-efficacy theory (Speier and Venkatesh 2002), the theory of planned behavior (Jones, Sundaram, and Chin 2002; Schillewaert, Ahearne, Frambach, and Moenaert 2005) and goal orientation theory (Jelinek, Ahearne, Mathieu, and Schillewaert 2006) to help explain the technology adoption process. New technological advancements, specifically the development of Web 2.0 and social media applications, are different and more public compared to prior technologies. This suggests that established models for adoption may not be appropriate for these applications.

The current paper integrates theoretical developments in the area of strategic management, namely the concept of intraorganizational cooperation (Tsai 2002), to examine potential antecedents and consequences of social media usage by a sales force. Social media represents a wide spectrum of internet-based applications where users (i.e., customers or firm representatives) create content, thus becoming the center of a network of coproduction (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner 2010). At the core, social media is a tool that “provides a way people share ideas, content, thoughts, and relationships online” (Scott 2009, p. 38). The customer-centric nature of social media suggests that it can be a valuable tool for sales professionals.

The research questions posed in this paper address how organizations handle social media within the firm and the implications this has on sales performance. Since social media usage is a relatively new tool for many salespeople, the authors' intent is to understand the antecedents to a sales person's use of social media, as it relates to cooperation across departments within the organization. Ultimately, the effect social media usage has on sales performance is of vital importance. Finally, this paper

investigates the effect that levels of training have on the efficacy of social media usage by a sales team. The conceptual model developed in this paper is tested by performing hierarchical regression analysis on data collected from a cross-industry sample of 1,699 sales professionals. Prior to presenting the conceptual model and developing the study's hypotheses, a brief overview of social media use among firms is presented.

Social Media

Social media has been defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 61). As the definition suggests, technological advances now allow online users to collaborate and co-create content on the World Wide Web (i.e., Web 2.0). An important underpinning of social media is the idea that individuals are connected via social networks and tend to communicate with other individuals in their network (Kozinets et al. 2010). The co-creation of content and lack of centralized control is what makes social media unique from other technological resources available to the sales force. Unlike customer relationship management software (and other sales force automation technologies), organizations do not possess complete control over the content created and distributed via social media applications. Rather, they must learn to leverage a resource in which they have limited control and the customer has greater influence.

The term Web 2.0 was coined in 2004 to describe a new method of how internet users collaborate and co-create online content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). This term emerged largely because of the development and speedy diffusion of social networking sites such as MySpace (launched in 2003), LinkedIn (launched in 2003) and Facebook (launched in 2004). While social media has existed for nearly a decade, the leveraging of these communication channels by for-profit

companies is still in its infancy, but is a growing phenomenon. The sales areas within these business organizations have been relatively slow to adopt the medium (Lager 2009), which may be a result of general skepticism among salespeople. Reporting on a study by the sales consultancy ES Research Group, Tsai (2009) notes that only a small percentage of sales representatives believe social media can be used to help win sales. For example, approximately one-third believe LinkedIn helps win sales; only 10% said the same about Facebook, and less than 5% believe that Twitter can be leveraged to secure sales. Nevertheless, there is growing recognition that social media applications are useful for monitoring a firm's brand image and engaging customers (Aquino 2012). In 2011, approximately 61% of Fortune 500 companies used Twitter, while 58% used Facebook, and 23% used Blogging (Barnes and Andonian 2011).

Among business-to-business (B2B) companies - which rely heavily on personal selling and relationship building to achieve corporate objectives (Belonax, Newell, and Plank 2007) - social media use has an even lower level of penetration. One study revealed that roughly 27% of B2B firms in the U.K. currently use social media (Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides 2011). Interestingly, this study also found that while attracting new customers and cultivating relationships are potential opportunities garnered from social media, the lack of staff familiarity and technical skills are major hindrances of social media adoption.

While actual adoption has been slow, there is a growing appreciation for the relevance of social media in B2B sales. Searcy (2012) argues social media is a valuable tool to gather information to help build a profile on prospective buyers. This perspective mirrors the developing concept of *Social selling* which suggests that the engine driving sales is changing from "who the salesperson knows" to "what the salesperson knows about who they know" (Sexton 2012). Responding to the notion that "chance favors the prepared mind," social

CRM tools like InsideView help sales teams understand potential customers better and allows them to “know before they go,” which leads to (among other things) more accurate proposals (Ostrow 2011).

According to Aquino (2012), social media applications are moving up the value chain from being simply novelties to viable communication mechanisms. Several services have emerged, providing a variety of solutions along the continuum from social media monitoring to social media engagement. Sprout Social, InsideView, Sysomos, Cymfony, and Attensity are just some examples (Aquino 2012). Broadly, these providers span popular social media websites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Pinterest to present consolidated information and analytics in a usable format. These solutions are gaining traction in the B2B space. For example, InsideView has several B2B customers including Trinet – an HR outsourcing company – and the business software/ hardware provider ORACLE. Similarly, Sprout Social counts among its clients the computer components manufacturer AMD and software developer Adobe.

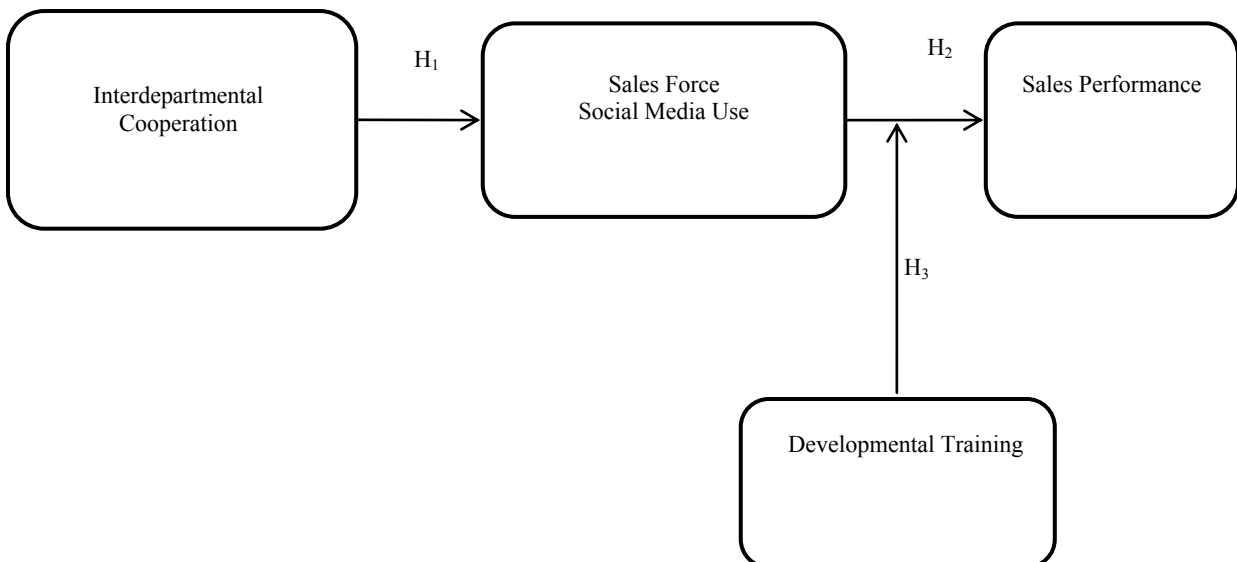
Despite the growing appreciation for the potential value of social media in the B2B space, adoption has been slow. Additionally, the factors that lead to social media usage among the sales force, as well as the performance implications of social media usage, remain unclear. This paper attempts to fill this void by presenting and testing a model which proposes collaboration within organizations is a way to share knowledge, diffuse skills, and ultimately enhance the use of social media among a sales force. In the following section, the conceptual model is developed (Figure 1) and subsequent hypotheses are provided.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Interdepartmental Cooperation and Social Media Use

Organizations are faced with many challenges, including facilitating the exchange of knowledge and the sharing of scarce resources across multiple departments (Tsai 2002). Firms that successfully allocate resources and share knowledge across units are at a distinct competitive advantage in the market (Guenzi and Trolio 2007; Grant 1996). The level of

FIGURE 1:
Model of Social Media Use Among the Sales Force



cooperation across business units is a key factor influencing this knowledge exchange (Dawes and Massey 2005). Inter-departmental cooperation is defined here as the degree to which different departments within a firm cooperate to achieve business objectives (Luo, Slotegraaf, and Pan 2006). The idea that cooperation within a firm is important for overall performance is largely grounded in the knowledge-based theory of the firm (Tsai 2002). According to this theory, individuals and departments within organizations develop unique knowledge structures that are immensely valuable to the firm (Grant 1996). This knowledge is most valuable when there is a high level of cooperation and sharing of knowledge across individuals and across departments.

Cooperation within firms enhances market performance because firms that have a high degree of inter-departmental cooperation are better able to process, use, and share market information. The *esprit de corps* that is fostered through cooperation facilitates a “quick exchange of customer and market information” (Menon, Jaworski, and Kohli 1997, p. 188). In addition to this intra-firm knowledge transfer, cooperation can also lead to the sharing of competencies and other resources (Lado, Boyd, and Hanlon 1997). Different departments within firms have varying competencies and available resources. A firm’s marketing department, for example, may have access to market level data and maintain a keen understanding of product development, while the firm’s sales force likely has substantial customer knowledge. Bridging the gap between these knowledge structures has important and positive firm performance implications (Homburg and Jensen 2007).

Social media applications are resources that are available to the organization as a whole, and often available to individual members within the organization. As stated above, social media usage is relatively new, which suggests individuals may not be thoroughly versed at how to best leverage these resources. Additionally, companies often grant access to

their “official” social media applications to a small number of employees, such as those in the marketing or new media departments (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). As a result of the newness of social media and traditional organizational structures, the sales force may not feel comfortable with or have the knowledge to leverage these tools. However, the sales force within an organization that has a high degree of inter-departmental cooperation will likely be more aware of the firm’s overarching social media strategy and be more comfortable with the resources as a whole. By collaborating with fellow employees who may be more knowledgeable about social media, the sales force will be able to absorb that knowledge and use it in their individual sales processes. Considering this, it is proposed that social media use among a sales force will be highest in organizations where there is a high level of inter-departmental cooperation.

H₁: *The greater the interdepartmental cooperation, the more the sales force will utilize social media.*

Social Media Use and Sales Performance

The sales function of an organization encompasses numerous boundary-spanning agents. The close relationship a firm’s sale force has with its customer base suggests that the sales force is the ideal source from which to gather customer information (Gordon, Schoenbachler, Kaminski, and Brouchous 1997). Gathering customer information is an important characteristic of a customer-oriented organization (Saxe and Weitz 1982), and a large body of research indicates customer-orientation leads to overall firm performance (Franke and Park 2006). Social media can be useful in collecting and internally sharing this valuable customer information.

In addition to being able to collect customer-generated information, social media also facilitates a collaborative, two-way communication between customer and company. Through social media, customers can communicate directly to companies, and companies can then respond to customers in

real-time. Importantly for marketers, social media allows customers to co-create value, collaborate in the innovative process, and provide suggestions for service and product improvements (Bijmolt et al. 2010). Research indicates that customers often develop loyalty to salespeople as opposed to the company itself (Palmatier, Scheer, and Steenkamp 2007). This suggests that customers may be more willing to communicate with and share valuable information with their sales representatives as opposed to an unfamiliar anonymous company employee. Through the use of social media, the sales function can facilitate valuable customer supportive behaviors which should also help enhance firm performance.

The social networking capability can be one of the most valuable characteristics of social media to organizations (Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels 2009). Individual users (i.e., customers) within the social media world are linked to other users through their “personal network”. This social network likely consists of other like-minded individuals who are, at least in some capacity, attracted to similar product and service offerings. Social media use allows the sales force to access customers’ social networks to generate potential leads and ultimately help them to expand their business. Considering these arguments, it is predicted that a sales force that uses social media will be more effective in terms of sales performance than those that do not.

H₂: *Social media use by the sales force will positively influence a firm’s sales performance.*

The Moderating Effect of Training

While it is expected that social media use will have a direct and positive effect on sales performance, there is likely an important factor moderating this relationship. Similar to any technological innovation, social media represents a relatively complex resource which can be difficult for individuals to successfully adopt. Researchers have even suggested that implementing complex technological innovations may in some instances adversely

affect performance in the short term (Grise and Gallupe 2000).

The successful implementation of a resource, especially a resource that is technologically complex, requires specialized knowledge and skills. Developmental training, defined here as the time management devotes to training the sales force, is one method to enhance this knowledge (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Rapp 2005). During developmental training sessions, management can communicate to the sales force the firm’s overarching social media strategy and how the sales force can help execute the strategy. Additionally, training can be a useful platform to teach individual sales representatives how best to utilize social media to grow their sales. That is, developmental training is an ideal way to share social media “best-practices” with the sales force. It is thus predicted that training will enhance the effectiveness of social media use in terms of the effect on sales performance.

H₃: *Developmental training moderates the effect of social media use on sales performance; the positive effect strengthens as training levels increase.*

METHOD

Data to test the hypotheses was gathered with the cooperation of Miller Heiman, a global leader in sales performance consulting. Study participants were business executives in revenue-generating roles across job functions, notably different levels in sales and marketing, including executives at the highest levels of firms. Data was collected by emailing a link to an embedded online survey. In addition to the original message, two follow-up reminders were sent via email. In all, 15,110 individuals clicked on the link; 1,699 respondents completed the survey, yielding an 11.2% response rate. To assess non-response bias, early and late respondent means were compared (Armstrong and Overton 1977). This process did not reveal any significant differences between the respondents.

Respondents were from various industries including consulting, professional services, technology-software, and business services. Table 1 lists the proportion of study participants in each of the more than twenty-five represented industries. The data consisted of respondents in over forty countries. The largest group hailed from the U.S. (51% of the sample), with the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and Canada also being significantly represented. A majority of the respondents (77%) were male.

Measures

Interdepartmental cooperation was assessed using a three-item 7-point Likert scale measure (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). The items included: (1) “Sales and marketing are aligned in what our customers want and need,” (2) “Our organization collaborates across departments to pursue large deals”, and (3) “Our organization regularly collaborates

**TABLE 1:
Sample Industry Data**

Industry	Percent
Aerospace and Defense	2.2
Business Services	7.1
Construction	2.6
Consulting and Professional Services	11.3
Consumer Products	1.8
Education	1.6
Oil/Gas	2.8
Energy	1.7
Finance and Banking	3.9
Insurance	2.1
Government	1.7
Healthcare – Capital	3.8
Healthcare – Consumables	6.0
Healthcare – Services	3.2
Hospitality and Food Service	.8
Food Service	1.4
Industrial and Chemical	4.3
Manufacturing	9.0
Media	.6
Pharmaceuticals	2.4
Technology – Hardware	5.9
Technology – Software	7.3
Technology – Services	4.8
Telecommunications – Equipment	2.0
Telecommunications – Services	3.4
Transportation	2.0
Utilities	.6
Wholesale	1.5
Missing	2.1
Total	100.0

across departments to manage strategic accounts” ($\alpha=.72$).

Three items were used to assess the time the organization devotes to training the sales force (1=not applicable, 8=5+ hours). Each question began with the following stem: “In an average week, how much time do you allocate to this activity?” (1) “...skill development for sales team members,” (2) “...product training for sales team members,” and (3) “...personal professional development” ($\alpha=.69$).

The degree to which the sales force uses *social media* was measured with a three-item, 7-point Likert scale measure (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). The items included: (1) “Our use of social media has significantly increased as a tool to identify new business opportunities,” (2) “Our use of social media has significantly increased as a tool to identify decision makers,” and (3) “The use of social media for business purposes in our organization is encouraged” ($\alpha=.88$).

To measure sales performance, respondents were asked to compare their organizations’ current performance to last year’s performance (on an 8-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=More than 10% decrease, 8=More than 20% growth) for the following items: (1) new account acquisition, (2) the number of qualified opportunities/leads, (3) customer retention rate, and (4) quota achievement for our sales force ($\alpha=.77$).

A number of variables were collected to control for possible firm- and industry-level variations in social media usage and/or sales performance.

First, to control for any effect organizational size may have on social media usage and/or sales performance, respondents were asked the size of their organization in terms of the total number of full-time salespeople. Next, to control for possible differences between domestic and international firms, the location of corporate headquarters was gathered. The variable “*U.S. Firm*” takes the value 1 if the company is headquartered in the United States and the value of 0 otherwise. Finally, to account for any possible variance between product-versus service-oriented companies, the variable “*Services Firm*” was added to the model. This variable takes the value of 1 if the company primarily operates in a services industry and the value of 0 otherwise. These variables are used as controls in the subsequent analysis.

Analysis and Results

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to analyze the survey data and test the study’s hypotheses. First, Model 1 includes the effects of the control variables and interdepartmental cooperation on social media use. Next, Model 2 includes the effects of the control variables, interdepartmental cooperation, and training on sales performance. In Model 3, social media use is included as an additional antecedent of sales performance. Finally, the interaction between social media use and training is added in Model 4. An overview of the results is detailed in Table 2.

In support of H₁, the effect of interdepartmental cooperation on social media use is positive and significant ($b=.38, p< .01$). The analysis also supports H₂: social media use has a positive and

TABLE 2:
Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach’s Reliabilities and Correlations

	M	SD	CR	1	2	3	4
1. Interdepartmental cooperation	4.88	1.19	.72	1			
2. Social Media Use	3.52	1.59	.88	.30	1		
3. Training	3.19	1.30	.69	.18	.12	1	
4. Performance	4.59	1.30	.77	.32	.21	.13	1

Note: All correlations significant at $p < .01$

significant effect on sales performance ($b = .11$, $p < .01$). In H_3 , it was predicted that training would positively moderate the relationship between social media use and sales performance. The significant interaction yielded in Model 4 ($b=.03$, $p < .05$) lends support to this prediction. Figure 2 illustrates the interaction effect that high levels of training amplify the positive effect social media use has on sales performance. When training is low, social media use has a relatively small effect on performance.

Discussion and Managerial Implications

This study utilizes the knowledge-based theory of the firm to provide a better understanding of social media usage by a sales force. Specifically, based on the concept of intraorganizational cooperation, it was predicted that sales force social media usage

would be greater within firms that have a high degree of cross-departmental cooperation. The empirical results support this hypothesis: interdepartmental cooperation in the company positively influences the use of social media among the sales force. In addition, the results indicate that sales performance is positively affected by the use of social media, and this effect can be further enhanced through developmental training in the organization. For many companies, the results are indicative of their experiences with social media. That is, there are gains to be made in using social media as part of sales and marketing programs; yet, the lack of education or training could be curtailing some of those gains (Hosford 2012; Constant Contact 2011).

A survey by Forrester Research, Inc. noted that only 46% of companies conducted “social media best practices training for employees”,

FIGURE 2:
Interaction Effect of Social Media Use and Training on Sales Performance

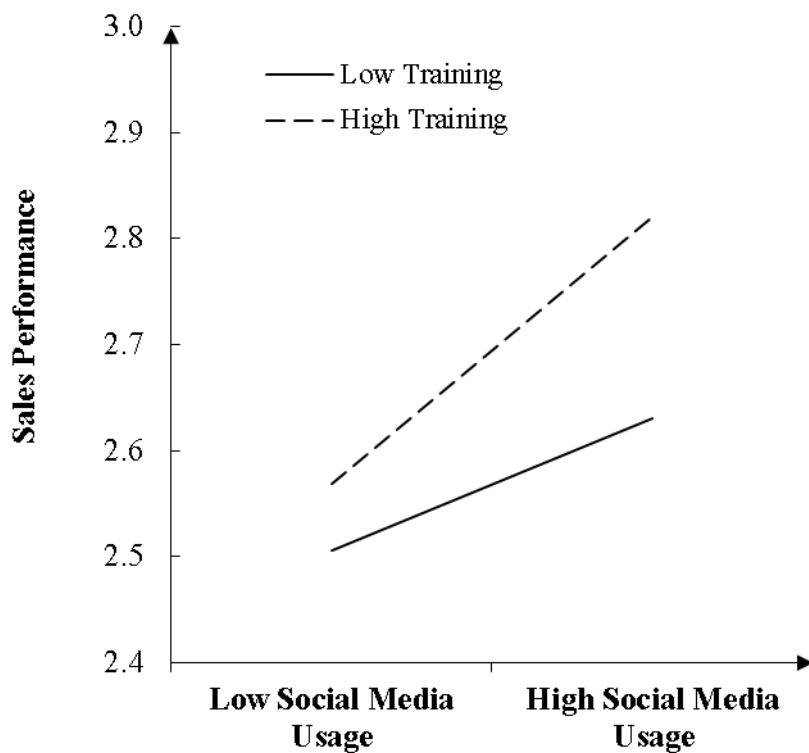


TABLE 3:
OLS Estimates for Antecedents of Social Media Use and Sales Performance

Dependent Variables	Social Media Use		Sales Performance	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	1.46** (.174)	2.81** (.152)	2.67** (.153)	2.69** (.153)
Control variables				
Size of organization	-.01 (.018)	-.01 (.015)	-.01 (.015)	-.01 (.015)
U.S. Firm (0/1)	.00 (.075)	-.03 (.062)	-.034 (.062)	-.03 (.062)
Services Firm (0/1)	.46** (.076)	-.15** (.063)	-.20** (.063)	-.20** (.063)
Main effects				
H₁: Interdepartmental cooperation	.38** (.031)	.34** (.026)	.30** (.027)	.30** (.027)
Training		.08** (.024)	.07** (.024)	.07** (.024)
H₂: Social media use (SMU)			.11** (.020)	.11** (.020)
Interaction effect				
H₃: SMU*Training				.03* (.014)
Adjusted R ²	.11	.11	.12	.12
F (Statistics)	50.71	39.81	38.34	33.65

* p < .05

** p < .01

Note: Unstandardized coefficients reported; numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

Sample size = 1,699.

while another 36% had “no plans” to do so (Corcoran 2011). This held true even when 75% of the respondents in the Forrester study claimed to currently use or plan to “pilot a long-term social marketing plan” (Corcoran 2011). In the study conducted for this paper, there is clear evidence that training could significantly increase the sales performance results for many companies. While companies continue to design their social media strategies, it is imperative that training be a large part of the implementation of the program. For example, before turning on a social platform for sales efforts, all involved must understand that this will no doubt change information exchange. Who will be expected to provide content, manage the community, and extract feedback to measure usage and value? What happens if the conversation turns negative? What are the triage steps to subtly regain order within the community so it remains a valuable exchange environment?

Furthermore, interdepartmental collaboration was a key antecedent for the use of social media by the sales force. This finding suggests that companies seeking to implement social media programs should determine the extent of internal collaboration that is occurring in the firm. Ensuring that collaboration is present will go a long way in supporting the gains that could be made through the use of social media by a sales force. Social media represents a complex, multifaceted resource that can be leveraged by many individuals within the firm. This suggests that collaboration and cooperation across departments is critical to ensure everyone within the company is clear in regards to the firm’s overarching social media strategy. The potential advantages of forming a positive social media culture within the sales force are just beginning to be understood. This is one of the first studies to focus on the dynamics of social media use. The inclination of sales forces to be pro-social, share ideas, and further strengthen relationships with clients is perhaps

what they do best—engage and educate. Obviously, social media is not a panacea. In fact, one must caution that social media alone might easily become a distraction or additional “noise” introduced into a pipeline operating at full capacity.

The results from this study contribute to the small body of research that has focused on social media and B2B sales performance, and is one of the first to also address training effects. With the landscape of selling ever-changing and accelerating due to technology advances, the use, and misuse, of social media by sales forces should be a priority for sales management and sales strategy. With buyers looking for credible selling partners (Peterson and Lucas 2001), face-to-face interaction may be giving way to some degree of social media. The significance of developing relationships with prospects and customers via the use of social media cannot be emphasized enough. As this study has noted, using social media is associated with increased sales performance and is moderated by the training received. While these relationships have been empirically tested with a robust sample size and industry diversity, it is one of the early examinations of social media in a business-to-business setting.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As is generally the case with cross-sectional data, the results represent the status of the respondents at the specific point in time when the study was conducted. Due to the dynamic nature of social media use by companies, differences in responses from one year to the next could exist. However, given that there have been similar descriptive findings in the practitioner/consulting arenas, the authors are confident that the study’s results are valid and informative. In fact, the study clearly points out what are concerns of many in the field who are attempting to implement social media strategic plans for their companies; particularly with respect to education/training/retraining personnel (Barnes and Lescault 2012; Constant Contact 2011; Corcoran 2011). This stream of

research is in its infancy and there is such a lack of information on this topic that even common demographics regarding social media tendencies such as age, education, and any gender effects would be of great interest.

Nevertheless, one significant future direction for this research is to examine longitudinal data to study the dynamic nature of social media use over time. With longitudinal data, the results could offer insight into potential lag effects between the key factors in the model. For instance, would training be more beneficial before or after implementation of a social media program? And, does interdepartmental collaboration continue to affect the use of social media by a sales force over time? In sum, future researchers should continue to consider the dynamic nature of interdepartmental cooperation and social media usage.

Finally, a key question that was not examined, but could be helpful to practitioners, is the extent to which certain social media platforms are the most impactful on sales performance. As much of the practitioner literature has determined, some platforms are used more than others. For instance, Facebook was found to be used by 95% of respondents in the *Constant Contact* study (2011), but only 82% found the tool effective. Similarly, 60% used Twitter yet only 47% found it to be effective for their companies (Constant Contact 2011). Which platforms are the most critical for B2B firms? And, which are likely to be the best in terms of sales performance?

Overall, many in the marketing and sales arenas are hard-pressed to find the right measure to determine social media’s return on investment (Barnes and Lescault 2012). The current study demonstrates a positive relationship between the use of social media and sales performance, and indicates that training plays an important moderating role in this relationship. This finding provides initial evidence that social media, if managed properly, can in fact have a positive return on investment. Future research must continue to identify additional measures of social media’s return on investment. Also,

future studies should consider additional moderating factors that affect the social media usage and firm performance. Uncovering such factors would provide additional insight to management in terms of how best to manage a company's social media strategy in order to maximize performance.

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