BRINGING “SOCIAL” INTO SALES: THE IMPACT OF SALESPEOPLE’S SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON SERVICE BEHAVIORS AND VALUE CREATION

Raj Agnihotri, Prabakar Kothandaraman, Rajiv Kashyap, and Ramendra Singh

The explosive growth in the use of social media has evoked a “gold rush”–like response from organizations. However, firms in general, and salespeople in particular, are uncertain about the fit between social media tools and their overall sales strategy. To address this issue, we advance a theoretical framework to explain the mechanisms through which salespeople’s use of social media operates to create value, and propose a strategic approach to social media use to achieve competitive goals. We draw on the existing literature on relationship marketing, task–technology fit theory, and sales service behavior to sketch a social media strategy for business-to-business sales organizations with relational selling objectives. The proposed framework describes how social media tools can help salespeople perform service behaviors leading to value creation.

In B2B [business-to-business] we [IBM] have a number of Websites that we built for our sales reps where we’ve enabled the reps to have a blog with RSS [Really Simple Syndication] feeds that are connected to LinkedIn and Twitter. . . . Some of our reps have Facebook pages also. . . . And our individual reps use Twitter to keep their customers updated about interesting news, events and things of that nature.

—Ed Linde II, senior marketing manager at IBM, speaking with eMarketer magazine on IBM’s social media efforts (Fredricksen 2010)

On March 21, 2011, Twitter celebrated its fifth anniversary. Compared to traditional communications, such as television and telephony, which boasted 150 million users in 89 and 39 years, respectively, Twitter reached the landmark in 4 years, taking a year less than its more famous cousin, Facebook. Driven by new and disruptive technologies, fundamental changes in the nature of social interactions have affected every aspect of society and commerce. Specifically, social media–supported transactions have emerged as an integral dimension of how people buy (Stephen and Toubia 2010), and social media networks have become an important facilitator of customer relationships (Tedeschi 2006). Based on the current state of business affairs, it is evident that firms and individuals seek important professional benefits from social media.

These social changes have special relevance for sales organizations, which serve as bridges between organizations and markets. Salespeople, often considered the eyes and ears of their organizations, are perhaps best positioned to use their social connections to improve sales performance (Bristor 1992). Traditionally, salespeople have operated at the intersection of social networks and sales organizations to create value for their customers and firms. Social activeness was assumed to provide benefits such as privileged access to customers, early discovery of customer needs, and referrals resulting in new revenue. Such close proximity to customers has allowed salespeople to champion intraorganizational efforts to coordinate internal value creating functions, and deliver superior value in customer relationships (Plouffe and Barclay 2007; Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj 2007). Occupying a central position within the buyer–seller network has enabled salespeople to develop cooperative customer relationships characterized by better information exchange, trust, reciprocity, and reduced conflict (Bristor 1992). Therefore, it is imperative to understand how social media tools can improve salespersons’ ability to create superior customer value.

Social media has captured the attention of salespeople and managers alike. A recent OgilvyOne global survey of salespeople found that almost half the buyers saw an increase in the role of social media in the buying process (Featherstonebaugh 2010). However, only 9 percent of salespeople reported any social media–related focus on sales by their respective organizations. Despite strong buyer enthusiasm, many companies are slow starters and remain skeptical about embracing social media to assist the selling function. From a sales organization’s

Raj Agnihotri (Ph.D., Kent State University), Assistant Professor of Marketing and Director of Research, The Schey Sales Centre, Ohio University, Athens, OH, agnihotra@ohio.edu.
Prabakar Kothandaraman (Ph.D., Pennsylvania State University), Associate Professor and Executive Director, Russ Berrie Institute for Professional Sales, William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ, kothandaramanp@wpunj.edu.
Rajiv Kashyap (Ph.D., University of Massachusetts, Amherst), Professor of Marketing and Interim Dean, Cotsakos College of Business, William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ, kashyapr@wpunj.edu.
Ramendra Singh (Ph. D., Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad), Assistant Professor of Marketing, IIM Calcutta, Kolkata, India, ramendra@iimcal.ac.in.

© 2012 PSE National Educational Foundation. All rights reserved. Permissions: www.copyright.com
ISSN 0885–3134 (print) / ISSN 1557–7813 (online)
DOI: 10.2753/PSS0885-3134320304
perspective, an understanding of how social media may be deployed to reap maximum benefits is still in its infancy. This has been attributed to a combination of cost, time, and lack of senior management knowledge, unproven success metrics, and perceived loss of control by the company (Gupta, Armstrong, and Clayton 2011).

Salespeople have been slow to adopt social media as a strategy to leverage business opportunities (Fredricksen 2010) due to a number of technology-related challenges. For example, naysayers predicting the decline of the human touch have cast doubt on the need to engage customers through social media. Further, salespeople are markedly reluctant to adopt new (and unproven) technologies as evidenced by the extensive failures of sales force automation (SFA) systems a decade ago (Marshall, Moncrief, and Lassk 1999; Speier and Venkatesh 2002). In addition to all the technology-related challenges, social media presents salespeople with the dilemma of contrasting strategic approaches to creating value. Should salespeople attempt to push information, products, and services through an expanding network of social contacts? Or should they try to pull customers by generating content to stimulate their interests and meet their needs? Moreover, due to the absence of a clear ROI (return on investment) approach to social media, there is little top management policy and metrics to guide salesperson success and performance (Gupta, Armstrong, and Clayton 2011).

Against this backdrop, we develop a framework to address the following research questions:

**RQ1: How can a salesperson use social media to participate in the organization’s pursuit of customer engagement?**

**RQ2: How can a salesperson harness the capabilities of social media to create value?**

Our research answers the call from sales scholars to study mechanisms that link salesperson use of technology to relationship performance (Ahearne et al. 2008; Hunter and Perreault 2007; Rapp, Agnihotri, and Forbes 2008).

Building on the theory of task–technology fit (TTF) (Goodhue and Thompson 1995), Ahearne et al. recognized that in B2B sales, the basic task requirement is “to build a long-term relationship” (2008, p. 673), and any technology functionality that helps improve communication between buyer and seller can be presumed to be a fit with relational selling tasks. Urging sales scholars to look beyond mere utilization of technology, they proposed a framework that involved “intervening variables . . . germane to the selling context in capturing technology’s indirect influence on salesperson performance” (Ahearne et al. 2008, p. 674).

We mirror this research approach by drawing on the conceptual logic of TTF to explain how salespeople can use social media to increase customer engagement and create customer value. Our paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss how social media can be deployed to achieve the goal of customer engagement. Second, we advance a framework with testable propositions based upon TTF theory to explain how salespeople’s use of social media can create value. Third, we outline a generic social media strategy for a sales force based on our framework. Finally, we discuss in detail the implications of our framework for researchers and managers.

**SALESPEOPLE AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE**

Social media, in the absence of any disciplinary lens, bears numerous descriptions and definitions. In a very broad sense, social media has been defined as digital content and network-based interactions that are developed and maintained by and between people (Cohen 2011). Kaplan and Haenlein defined social media 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” (2010, p. 61). Researchers posit that individuals have used social media “to participate in social networks, which enabled them to create and share content, communicate with one another, and build relationships” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010, p. 312).

These eclectic notions highlight two primary themes of social media use—digital content creation and network-based interactions—which may overlap but at the same time enable users to derive different outcomes. This view is also shared by industry practitioners. For example, SAP, a leading enterprise software company, began using social media to engage customers in 2003 and may be regarded as one of the earliest adopters of social media. An important insight gained from the social media use was that their salespeople had to refrain from barging into social networks asking for business leads and referrals. “You have to earn the right to ask for leads,” declared SAP’s Senior Vice President Mark Yolton during a recent “Social Media Best Practice” seminar (http://vimeo.com/26813929/). Salespeople, weaned on the traditional sales approach where “asking for business” was considered a “fundamental right,” were advised to embrace a “digital body language” that emphasized trust building through blogs and other content-creation exercises (Woods 2010). In this case, successful use of social media was jointly attributed to trust-building activities that helped strengthen customer bonds and network expansion that substantially increased salesperson reach.

Aligning with this logic, we refer to salespeople’s use of social media as any social interaction–enhancing technology that can be deployed by sales professionals to generate content (e.g., blogs, microblogs, wikis) and develop networks (e.g., social networks, online communities). Embedded in our description is the notion of a quasi-dichotomy of interaction-enhancing technologies focused on “pulling” customers (e.g., blogs, wikis).
toward salesperson-generated content at one end, versus those geared toward “pushing” information through expanding networks of connections (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook) at the other. Such categorization can help salespeople understand how to deploy social media to achieve the strategic goal of customer engagement. Note that the choice of appropriate social media will differ based on factors such as stage of customer relationship and industry characteristics.

Customer engagement has become a “strategic imperative” for businesses since “engaged customers play a key role in viral marketing activity by providing referrals and/or recommendations for specific products, services, and/or brands to others” (Brodie et al. 2011, p. 252). Customer-oriented salespeople have often sought new ways to interact and engage with customers (Jones, Busch, and Dacin 2003) to co-create value (Brodie et al. 2011). Adopting a psychological process perspective, Bowden (2009) suggests that customer engagement (1) involves a calculative commitment, which forms the basis for consequent buying behavior; (2) leads to an emotional commitment, which forms the basis for buyer loyalty; and (3) increases buyers’ involvement and trust. Conceptualizing it as a psychological state, Brodie et al. (2011) posit that customer engagement is formed by interactive customer experiences that are embedded in service relationships aimed at co-creating value.

Drawing on these theoretical streams, we observe that customer engagement occurs through repeated social media interactions between buyer and seller, in which positive (negative) feedback strengthens (weakens) buyer–seller relationships. Salespeople can increase calculative commitment by reaffirming attributes important to purchase decisions. Such confirmation may be the subject of blogs that showcase salesperson expertise or technical forums that draw on the collective intelligence of existing customers and suppliers. These approaches may be particularly useful for sellers of complex products, who must satisfy the needs of buying centers with multiple buying criteria. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ may also be deployed to create, maintain, and enhance the social dimension of relationships with customers. These offer opportunities to engage customers one-on-one through attention to their personal events and shared media. This is a complex issue because salespeople need to exercise caution and avoid transgressing the boundaries between buyers’ professional and personal domains. Further, customer engagement is often considered to be highly correlated with trust and commitment in buyer–seller relationships. Push strategies that utilize large professional networks to disseminate referrals are likely to be more effective when customers are highly engaged. Customer engagement can be increased by providing opportunities to seek, give, and pass opinions (Chu and Kim 2011) about products and services in online communities, wikis, and creative works—sharing sites (e.g., YouTube, Flickr). Such co-created value represents a dynamic and swelling fountain of knowledge for existing and future customers, which can be used to increase buyer involvement and trust.

Using social media to create customer value is not without its challenges. As with any other strategy implementation or technology initiative, social media is also prone to mishandling. An overly liberal approach toward social media use by salespeople may provide opportunities for competition or dissatisfied customers to take control. This is particularly important because social media, unlike any other, derives its strength and weaknesses from being completely open, and user driven. Further, inconsistencies in terms of responses to customer requests and outdated information can negatively influence desired outcomes.

Faced with similar challenges, salespeople survived the advent of the Internet and succeeded in harnessing the power of e-commerce tools such as customer relationship management (CRM) to create, build, and service highly profitable customers (Ahearne, Hughes, and Schillewaert 2007; Sundaram et al. 2007). This success was built on identifying the appropriate role for technology in the selling process. In a similar fashion, effective execution of social media strategy will require salespeople to embrace customers as co-creators of value, and profitable customer relationships as the optimal outcome of the sales process. Our research takes an initial step toward bringing “social” into sales and presents a framework for the salesperson’s differential use of social media to create value.

**FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT**

We use TTF theory (Goodhue and Thompson 1995) to lay the theoretical foundation for our conceptual framework. The central tenet of TTF theory is that in order to reap rewards from a technology initiative, “the technology must be utilized, and the technology must be a good fit with the tasks it supports” (Goodhue and Thompson 1995, p. 213). TTF theory characterizes tasks as actions performed by users to complete an assignment and defines technology characteristics as technology tools that can be used to support execution of these tasks (Goodhue and Thompson 1995). Further, TTF theory highlights the importance of an individual user’s characteristics, such as experience with the technology and motivation to perform tasks, as key to effective and efficient use of technology (Goodhue and Thompson 1995).

We draw on TTF theory to explain the impact of social media use by salespeople on sales performance. This is consistent with the logic employed by other sales researchers studying the relationship between technology use and sales performance. For instance, Ahearne et al. (2008) used TTF theory to examine the mechanisms through which salespeople’s use of information technology (IT) affects their performance.
They found that a salesperson’s relationship-oriented behaviors, such as customer service and adaptability, mediated the influence of IT use on a salesperson’s customer relationship performance. Similarly, Hunter and Perreault proposed that “uses of ST [sales technology] influence relationship-building performance with customers indirectly through a mediated relationship forging process” (2007, p. 18). In another study, building on TTF theory, Rapp, Agnihotri, and Forbes (2008) proposed a sales technology—performance chain that focuses on the differential use of sales technology by the sales force to secure performance. Specifically, they argued that strategic use of sales technology (i.e., CRM use) had a positive impact on smart selling behaviors, as exemplified by adaptive selling. They also posited that the tactical use of sales technology, as exemplified by higher effort, would be positively related to the operational use of sales technology (i.e., SFA use). Further, they proposed that these salesperson behaviors improved salesperson objective performance.

Extending the sales technology literature that calls for differential use of technology to achieve different strategic goals, we discuss the nature of social media and underscore its strategic use by salespeople in order to create value. Specifically, we use “pull” and “push” to describe salesperson strategies aimed at routing customer access to information by varying the use of social media. A critical factor that differentiates between pull and push is the level of control customers are able to exercise over the flow of information. Salespeople pull customers toward salesperson-generated content by using social media that provide customers control over types of information, modes of access, and opportunities to share such information. Examples of social media that facilitate pull strategies include blogs, microblogs (e.g., Twitter), vlogs, collaborative wikis and microsites, and content communities (e.g., YouTube, Viddler). We refer to these as content enablers. Salespeople push information to customers through social media that facilitate the creation and rapid deployment of networks. Such technologies offer customers little control over the length, frequency, and timing of communications received. Examples of social media that facilitate push strategies include various types of networking platforms (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+). We refer to these as network enablers.

The proposed framework adheres to TTF theory and the logic embedded in recent sales technology—performance research that suggests that the salesperson’s service behaviors will mediate the impact of technology use—in this case, social media use—on salesperson value creation. Moreover, we posit that differences in perceptions between salespeople and customers that govern the creation of value in a relationship will ensure that social media’s contribution to successful value creation in a relationship will be through separate paths depending on the fit between social media capabilities and salesperson service behaviors.

Value Creation

Value is a multidimensional concept that is context specific, and scholars have shown that services, resources, and experiences are embedded in the creation of value (Vargo and Lusch 2004). For example, Holbrook describes value as “an interactive relativistic preference experience” (1994, p. 27). Any market offering is considered attractive for the customer if it captures its value—in-use (Vargo and Lusch 2004), where the focus is not on the market offering, but on the value creation processes, in which value for customers emerges during consumption (Grönroos 2000; Möller 2008). We adopt this perspective to suggest that a salesperson’s value creation refers to the efforts and expertise that enable customers’ value creation processes (Singh and Koshy 2011).

As Anderson (1995) notes, value creation is considered the raison d’etre of collaborative customer–supplier relationships. The rich body of knowledge on value creation in business markets (e.g., Beverland, Farrelly, and Woodhatch 2004; Eggert, Ulaga, and Schultz 2006; Flint, Woodruff, and Gardial 2002; Ulaga and Eggert 2005) predominantly focuses on the value of the physical product. In the same vein, the popular concept of relationship value (Payne and Holt 1999) focuses on products, delivery, service, and interactions as key dimensions of value for customers (e.g., Eggert and Ulaga 2002; Möller and Törrönen 2003; Walter, Ritter, and Gemünden 2001; Ulaga 2003).

Research posits that apart from the physical product, service and technical support attributes play a vital role in shaping customer perceptions of benefits received (e.g., Eggert and Ulaga 2002). This viewpoint is aligned with other conceptualizations of customer value. For example, Lapierre (2000) categorized different customer perceived benefits into three categories that are product, service, and relationship related. Notably, drivers for service-related benefits include responsiveness, flexibility, reliability, and technical competence. Drivers for relationship-related benefits involve seller’s image, trust, and seller’s solidarity with the customer. For the current study, we adopt this multidimensional conceptualization of customer perceived value and include service- and relationship-related benefits.

The industrial marketing literature suggests that the value creation process is a “sustained joint effort,” and the outcome of such process is relational value that should be assessed from the seller’s perspective as well (Möller and Törrönen 2003, p. 110). Therefore, in the current framework, we also include the salesperson perceived value. Specifically, we posit that salesperson perceived benefits include the attainment of customer loyalty or, in other words, securing the repeat purchase. We build our case by drawing on the B2B marketing literature that proposes that relationships contribute to both direct and indirect value (Möller and Törrönen 2003; Walter, Ritter, and
Direct relationship value derived by salespeople includes profits, volume, and safeguards (i.e., guaranteed business), whereas indirect value include (customer) innovations, market referrals, environmental scanning (scouting), and access (to network participants) (Möller and Törrönen 2003).

From the above list of benefits, safeguarding, market referrals, environmental scanning, and access are of particular interest. Safeguarding refers to "the possibility of guaranteeing a level of business and revenue" from specific customers (Möller and Törrönen 2003, p. 110). Market referrals and customer recommendations that help build new relationships and identify new customers are also attractive, as is the increased benefit of acquiring market intelligence and performing the scouting function more effectively. Increased access to network actors is a desired relationship benefit, which, like the other benefits, is an outcome of service behaviors facilitated by social media use.

When customers perceive value in business exchanges with a particular salesperson, entering into long-term contracts can reduce transaction and negotiation costs (Bendapudi and Berry 1997). Similarly, a stronger and loyal relationship will increase the effectiveness of information sharing that leads to bidirectional and more frequent information exchanges, a higher perceived equity and fairness in the relationship, better sales forecasting, and customization, among other benefits. These factors in turn increase value creation by salespeople (Bendapudi and Berry 1997). Often, a large portion of the supplier's value-creating activities is supported by a series of relational exchanges between the supplier and the customer (e.g., Eggert and Ulaga 2002; Möller and Törrönen 2003; Payne and Holt 1999; Ulaga 2003). Maintaining a loyal customer base requires a salesperson to choose a set of behaviors akin to a long-term investment (Simpson, Sigauw, and Baker 2001), and this relational investment through competitive service offerings leads to value creation as described earlier.

For the proposed framework, we focus on the salesperson's role in value creation during consumption. Although a plethora of research focuses on the contribution of salespeople to value creation during the buying process (e.g., Anderson and Narus 1998; Moncrief and Marshall 2005; Rackham and DeVincentis 1998), we have chosen to study value creation after the buying decision has been made for two reasons. First, recent sales research has drawn attention to the enormous scope for a salesperson to develop relationships and create value after the point of initial sale (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007; Ahearne et al. 2008). Second, this better represents the salesperson's ability to create value using social media.

Despite the fact that research on customer value in business markets has had a long tradition (Lindgren and Wynstra 2005), there is a great deal to be unraveled from the perspective of what leads to value creation by salespeople. One such antecedent proposed in this paper is the salesperson's service behaviors. Customers perceive service activities as an investment in relational asset building for understanding their requirements, and for adapting the offerings to meet their requirements (Joshi and Randall 2001). Since salespeople play a greater role (compared to their firms) in sustaining customer relationships (Palmatier et al. 2006), and customer-centric selling approaches are based on customer-driven value creation (Jolson 1997), it follows that a salesperson's service behaviors will have a positive influence on customer perceived value.

Past research in sales has acknowledged that sales behaviors (e.g., working hard, working smart) mediate relationships between salesperson-specific variables (e.g., resources, characteristics, and traits) and salesperson performance (Fang, Palmatier, and Evans 2004; Hunter and Perreault 2007). Hunter and Perreault (2007) argued that technology implementations in sales organizations should be evaluated using a behavioral process approach. Specifically, they provided empirical evidence to support the need for a fit between salespeople and their service behaviors. While a number of service behaviors have been studied in previous research (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007; Ahearne et al. 2008), we focus on three sets of salesperson behaviors that exemplify a salesperson's customer engagement and have the greatest potential to create value through social media use. Next, we provide the theoretical arguments to support the need for a fit between service behaviors and the differential use of social media.

**Service Behaviors—Social Media Fit to Create Value**

In general, researchers inquiring into the use of sales technology appear to suggest a broader view of a salesperson's role that is not limited to just objective outcomes but also includes subjective assessments such as customer relationship performance and relationship quality (Ahearne et al. 2008; Hunter and Perreault 2007). The reason for this shift can be attributed to the fact that more and more industrial buyers are seeking enhanced value-added services from salespeople (Liu and Leach 2001; Singh and Koshy 2011). Recognizing these changes, recent sales research has also focused on salesperson service behaviors (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007; Plouffe, Hulland, and Wachner 2009). Per this perspective, salespeople need to perform service behaviors such as information communication, customer service (e.g., responsiveness and reliability), and trust building (e.g., demonstrating empathic concerns and sportsmanship) even after closing the sale (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007; Ahearne et al. 2008). Such service behaviors are categorized as “ongoing” and they serve the purpose of “nurturing and developing the exchange relationship” (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007, p. 604).
The sales service behavior perspective underscores the link between service behaviors and customer relationship performance (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007), but the scope of its influence can be extended to value creation. The conceptual basis for this extension is that customer value is created during consumption and not embedded in the product itself (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Since these service behaviors are performed by salespeople during the consumption process (Plouffe, Hulland, and Wachner 2009), they suffice as criteria for value creation. This argument is particularly relevant in our framework because the prevalence of social media has made it easier for sellers to enable, organize, and facilitate the value creation process (Michel, Vargo, and Lusch 2008).

Although different uses of social media help secure different outcomes, they overlap in significant ways and cannot be studied as unique processes in an absolute way. Keeping this in mind, we propose a theoretical framework (Figure 1) that suggest that customer perceived value will be dependent on the fit between the use of social media as a social content enabler and salesperson service behaviors to “pull” customers toward the salesperson generated content. Similarly, salesperson perceived value creation will rely on the fit between the use of social media as a social network enabler and salesperson service behaviors to “push” information by expanding the networks of customer connections.

We now proceed to expand on the above and present testable propositions that address the social media–service behavior fit for each of the three dimensions of salesperson service behaviors—information sharing, customer service, and trust building—and their paths to customer and salesperson perceived value.

**Information Sharing and Social Media Use**

In a buyer–seller relationship context, information communication refers to “the formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between firms” (Anderson and Narus 1990, p. 44). Sales researchers view communication of information as “regularly relaying product information to the customer in a clear and concise manner” (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007, p. 605). Information-sharing behaviors include information receiving, information using, and information giving (Agnihotri, Rapp, and Trainor 2009; Reid, Pullins, and Plank 2002).

Recent sales research shows that salesperson use of sales technology will improve communications due to the increased opportunity, flexibility, and ability to share information (Agnihotri, Rapp, and Trainor 2009). In the CRM context, technology use is beneficial when it supports organizational processes that aim to manage customer experiences. Such customer-oriented technology tools do not substitute for business processes, but instead serve to enhance their effective-

ness (Jayachandran et al. 2005). In a similar vein, the use of social media by a sales force can further enhance the ability to develop customer relationships due to increased opportunities to exchange information.

To accelerate information exchange, salespeople can conduct a live question and answer session on their Facebook page with their customers and prospects. Some of the micro-blogging and social networking services are very useful to get the word out about new developments/posts and for quick interaction with customers. In the traditional model, salespeople consciously avoided talking about another customer’s struggle using their product or service. This was true even if such situations had been resolved to the satisfaction of that customer. However, as is the case with the SAP Community Network, customers openly talk about thorny issues and a new prospect watching the community’s content space can access the exchange between customer and salesperson or technical expert. This phenomenon significantly enhances the salesperson’s information-sharing behaviors.

The customer as a participant in the value creation process is de rigueur in the marketing literature, and consequently the notion of the customer as an internal entity residing within a business process loop has found wide support (Anderson and Dubinsky 2004). Also, customers aim to use their market relationships to gain competencies related to product and services (Anderson and Dubinsky 2004). Therefore, in a value-oriented process, salespeople are expected to enhance buyer competencies by providing them with relevant and useful information regarding the product and its use, and notably, these efforts can be realized by using social media as a social content enabler.

**Use of social media by salespeople as a social network enabler involves exploring and exploiting informal and direct links with people outside (e.g., prospects, customers, market influencers) as well as within the organization (e.g., colleagues from same/different departments, superiors) to enhance salesperson perceived value.** Social media products such as Oracle’s Sales Prospector and Radian6 of Salesforce.com enable salespeople to consolidate customers’ social media conversations and other procurement information in the public domain. Salespeople then actively pursue networking opportunities with prospects with a view to pushing relevant product- and usage-related information using the resultant network connection. This also helps salespeople to engage customers in dialogues that are enriched by their social grounding and gradually build the collective intelligence by expanding the social network, reciprocally, for themselves as well as for buyers. Formally stated:

**Proposition 1a:** The greater the fit between the salesperson's information-sharing behaviors and the social media capabilities to pull customers toward salesperson-generated content, the greater the customer perceived value.
Proposition 1b: The greater the fit between the salesperson’s information-sharing behaviors and the social media capabilities to push information through expanding networks of customer connections, the greater the salesperson perceived value.

Customer Service and Social Media Use

The services literature tags responsiveness and reliability as quality attributes (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). A salesperson’s reliability corresponds to his or her “dependability and consistence,” whereas responsiveness is associated with “willingness or readiness” to render services efficiently (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). A salesperson’s customer service behaviors are sometimes labeled “diligent behaviors” (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007). Diligence is revealed by the degree of salesperson reliability and responsiveness. In the B2B sales context, where the salesperson is in direct contact with the customer, responsiveness and reliability “appear to be inextricably bound together” in one dimension.

This includes prompt responses from the salesperson as well as “following up on commitments, fulfilling customer requests, and remaining available when needed” (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007, p. 605).

In sales technology research, customer service behaviors mediate a salesperson’s sales technology use and customer relationship performance (e.g., Ahearne et al. 2008). Propositions are built on the logic that “technology should permit salespeople to serve customers faster and more reliably, while enabling the salesperson to form closer bonds with his or her customers through the retrieval of key personal information” (Ahearne et al. 2008, p. 674).

Using the aforesaid reasoning, we argue that social media availability and use enables salespeople to offer customers various touch-points, thereby influencing customers’ perceptions of a salesperson’s sensitivity toward the relationship. Salespeople servicing complex and geographically dispersed buying centers can conduct online meetings with all members of the buying center at the same time from a distant location with tools such as GoToMeeting. Webinar tools such as Linqto
provide an easy opportunity to have one-to-many or many-to-many engagement solutions. Salespeople can also make use of different e-communities and online discussion forums to discover strengths and weaknesses of their own and competitor product offerings. E-communities offer platforms for customers to review, praise, and criticize products. Participation in such communities allows salespeople to read and comment on customer reviews, dismiss rumors, and tackle competitive claims. To maintain consistency and readiness, an individual salesperson or a group of salespeople can develop and maintain a blog in the format of an online journal. Blogs are useful for expressing opinions, educating customers, and initiating discussions related to the functionality of the products and their optimal utilization for customers.

Social media can expand information attainment because its use as a social content enabler permits salespeople to draw upon extensive social knowledge about product use and customers and make them easily available. This in turn increases their capacity to provide reliable and accurate information to customers in a timely fashion. Social media platforms can enhance reliability through increased salesperson attention to service fulfillment, personalized attention, and expedient processing of service requests. In addition, social media's use as a social network enabler can help salespeople mobilize networks of suppliers and partners to provide timely customer solutions and support. For instance, Xerox Corporation has 14 blogs that connect salespeople, prospects, customers, product specialists, and so forth (Hannay 2010). Such links provide salespeople with unique and frequent opportunities to share information with customers about company products, services, events, and community initiatives that can serve to further inform and cement customer relationships. Further, with the help of social media tools, salespeople can conduct live chat sessions or webinars to provide additional value through staged interactions.

Based on the foregoing arguments, we formally propose:

Proposition 2a: The greater the fit between the salesperson’s customer service behaviors and the social media capabilities to pull customers toward salesperson-generated content, the greater the customer perceived value.

Proposition 2b: The greater the fit between the salesperson’s customer service behaviors and the social media capabilities to push information through expanding networks of customer connections, the greater the salesperson perceived value.

Trust Building and Social Media Use

The marketing literature associates successful relationships with greater levels of mutual trust between buyer and seller (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Recent sales research describes salespersons’ trust-building efforts as an intangible value offering in a customer—salesperson business relationship (Boujena, Johnston, and Merunka 2009). From the salesperson service behaviors perspective, trust-building activities and behaviors are associated with “good social judgment and professionalism” and include the demonstration of patience and flexibility during exchange encounters (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007).

The sales literature has recognized customer orientation, competency, honesty, dependability, and likability as drivers of salesperson–customer trust (Hawes, Mast, and Swan 1989). Extending this view, recent research proposes that sales technology has the potential to “help salespersons in developing customer trust by allowing them to better demonstrate trust driving behaviors” (Boujena, Johnston, and Merunka 2009, p. 139). Championing this proposition, we further argue that social media tools offer opportunities for salespeople to execute trust-building behaviors and activities. Social media use can clearly help salespeople exhibit positive social judgments by drawing customers into their own social networks. Social networking platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn allow salespeople to connect with friends, customers, and influencers and engage with networks and communities. For example, LinkedIn, which is popular among professionals, enables individuals to obtain recommendations that can be an efficient and effective tool for salespeople to bolster their credentials. Customers now have an opportunity to not only learn more about the salesperson but also inspect professional connections, including group memberships. This helps customers increase their knowledge and, more important, attests to the salesperson’s efforts to share timely and meaningful information (Anderson and Narus 1990).

On another dimension, social media tools enable salespeople to capture, organize, and remember personal details of their customers. Social media facilitate a salesperson’s ability to gain personal detailed information about a particular customer. Large corporations are increasingly putting distance between key buyers and salespeople through several layers of committees and paperwork aimed at screening buyers at the outset. Industrial salespeople who deal with such organizations or unusually large buying centers may attempt to circumvent such procedural layers and get to know their buyers online. For example, social networking Web sites such as Facebook remind users about the personal details of connections such as birthdays. Twitter, the most popular microblogging and social networking Web site, allows salespeople to follow their customers, and to know what they are trending. Salespeople are kept well aware of customer interests and preferences. Such capabilities can help a salesperson provide a personal touch to a business relationship.

Salespeople who aim to create value for their customers can attempt to help them in achieving their goals with the help
of social media. It is difficult for salespeople to create value for their customers by just outlining the options; instead they should be able to offer critical suggestions and solutions on a continuous basis in order to earn and maintain trust (Ingram et al. 2007). Using social media to generate industry- or customer-specific content and making it accessible to buyers will send a signal to the buyer that a particular salesperson really cares about the buyer’s bottom-line goals. This will lead to customer perceived value. In addition, social media-enabled networks will give salespeople a great opportunity to create value for themselves. Social media’s use as a social network enabler offers salespeople a pathway to penetrate accounts at a social level. Within the context of B2B selling, expansion of social networks will create “economic value” for participating suppliers (Stephen and Toubia 2010).

Therefore, we propose:

**Proposition 3a:** The greater the fit between the salesperson’s trust-building behaviors and the social media capabilities to pull customers toward salesperson generated content, the greater the customer perceived value.

**Proposition 3b:** The greater the fit between the salesperson’s trust-building behaviors and the social media capabilities to push information through expanding networks of customer connections, the greater the salesperson perceived value.

To this point, we have discussed the process by which social media may affect value creation. In the next and subsequent sections, we discuss how a firm might design an appropriate social media strategy and discuss implications for its use by the sales force.

**SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SALES FORCE**

Social media provide customers with motivation, opportunity, and ability to interact and engage with firms (Gruen, Osmonbekov, and Czaplewski 2005; Maclnnis, Moorman, and Jaworski 1991), and for that reason, social media tools help salespeople build social networks and develop knowledge bases. Thus, the focus and goal of a salesperson’s social media strategy should be to build social capital so as to facilitate the successful execution of service behaviors. In the best possible way, this goal can be achieved through active customer engagement. While social media creates “extensive opportunities” to engage customers (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010), the important issue for salespeople is to identify the types of communications that would encourage customers to interact, engage, and establish relationships with them.

Another important point for salespeople to keep in mind while devising a social media strategy is the positive influence of social media within the organization. Social media can provide a platform for interaction, information sharing, relationship development, and a positive work environment. Effective use of social media can be a blessing for salespeople because internal working relationships and coordination strategies are essential for high sales performance (Plouffe and Barclay 2007; Steward et al. 2010).

A relational approach facilitated by social media and executed by the sales force would preserve the customer relationship and relationship-selling practices that have been the erstwhile pride of salespeople. However, a transactional approach that opens the door to subsequent interactions and relationships may also be considered as part of a social media strategy. For instance, consider Groupon, a social media company that has traditionally promoted “social commerce” in the business-to-consumer (B2C) arena by letting customer groups create their own saving mechanisms through coupons, thereby giving control to customers for value creation. More recently, they ventured into the B2B area by working with a consulting firm, Ajilitee, that was willing to offer a discount for a data-analysis service to cloud computing conference attendees (Sherman 2010).

The emergence of “social selling” heralds a new era in which professional selling is predicated on the strength of social media allies within a social enterprise. In fact, IBM’s newest product line, called “Smart Commerce,” is aimed at helping companies successfully harness the power of social media to gain relational benefits. The company estimates that its social commerce line would make up to $10 billion in sales by 2015 (Spiegel 2011). Some experts talk about “social CRM” as an extension of traditional CRM, adding social functions, methods, and resources that facilitate interactions between customers and organizations (Greenberg 2010).

As customers flock to social media in increasing numbers and fervor, it is imperative for salespeople to understand and evaluate the potential effects of social media use on sales performance. To address this issue, we outline a social media strategy. Specifically, we discuss the key elements that comprise the core of a prototypical social media strategy, as well as some boundary conditions that impose limits on the generalizability of such a strategy. Our selection of strategy elements, namely, goals delineation, information exchange, competitive intelligence, and performance metrics, is based on the arguments and suggestions made by practitioners and scholars in the context of social media strategy. Levy (2011) suggested that a strong social media strategy needs to (1) define business goals, (2) target the specific use of social media by the target audience, (3) take into consideration the competitors’ moves and strategy, (4) keep track of market events, and (5) set milestones to follow progress.

In another effort, Gupta, Armstrong, and Clayton (2011) outlined a framework for social media use by managers and suggested five key steps toward leveraging social media. They
labeled these steps as *immerse* (e.g., learning social media technology), *reflect* (e.g., linking social media functionality with firm strategy), *define* (e.g., setting pragmatic objectives for social media use), *engage* (e.g., keeping audiences engaged through relevant and authentic content), and *evaluate* (e.g., determining metrics and modifying tactics). Congruent with these efforts, we argue that social media strategy should involve the outlining of core objectives and aspirations of salespeople, the execution of a key approach to gain success and engage customers, the monitoring of competitors’ actions, and the assessment of performance.

It is important to mention that the proposed strategy is bound by several limitations. First, as noted earlier, we are concerned primarily with firms that employ and rely on large sales forces to derive the bulk of their revenues. Second, we are limited by the idiosyncratic nature of buyer–seller relationships and variations in strategic objectives, industry types, and product complexity. Finally, communication modes will continue to evolve in tandem with changes in social media technology and adoption rates by sales organizations, necessitating changes in social media strategy. Keeping these boundary conditions in mind, below we discuss each element of the strategy in detail.

Goals Delineation

Salespeople may have different goals depending on the type of industry, products, or services offered, and other situational factors related to their sales processes. Two primary salesperson goals facilitated by social media are acquiring new customers and servicing existing customers. Both goals are in line with the top three objectives for U.S. firms, which include *customer loyalty*, *brand awareness*, and *customer acquisition* (Direct Marketing Association 2010). In the B2B sales context, social media tools provide salespeople with a user-friendly platform for communicating product and service reviews and showcasing testimonials to increase their credibility in the marketplace. Social networks can also be used to generate referrals, qualify prospects, and develop leads, thereby reducing the costs of customer acquisition. For example, a salesperson for a general technology (e.g., construction industry specific) provider can ascertain that a civil engineering and consulting firm has secured a large account via the search updates feature in LinkedIn. Armed with such information, the salesperson may decide to congratulate the engineering firm and also initiate a communication regarding innovative technology tools for the construction industry that the firm may find interesting. In another example, a salesperson working for a CRM technology supplier can use social media to receive feedback from buyers and stay in touch with them. Further, a salesperson from a pharmaceutical company can reach out to his or her social network and promote business by blogging about firm news and tweet deals and promotions that may appeal to the salesperson’s social network.

In summary, social media makes it easy for a salesperson to listen and respond to customers conveying specific messages that are critical building blocks for long-term business relationships. Further, the power of social media can be harnessed to increase customer loyalty, trust, and commitment through constant interactions aimed at providing superior customer solutions. Note that salespeople must clearly identify and prioritize their social media objectives so that organizational structures and processes are strategically aligned and resources effectively allocated.

Information Exchange

As our framework posits, an effective and efficient information exchange process is a critical antecedent to growing trust in buyer–seller relationships (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier et al. 2006). However, the emergence of social media has marked the disappearance of traditional approaches to communicating with customers and the arrival of a new set of problems for salespeople. For instance, customers now gather around discussion blogs giving unprepared salespeople little time to respond to their concerns. Further, salespeople no longer enjoy exclusive access and control over information about customer needs—it is not uncommon to find customers posting LinkedIn queries that can easily be picked up by direct competitors. In effect, salespeople are confronted by technology changes that challenge their traditional roles as “information brokers” and necessitate new approaches that combine tech sophistication with transparent communication practices. Therefore, it is necessary for sales organizations to review sales forces to overcome these challenges with social media training programs that are supported by clear and sound policies.

Social media–supported information exchanges will be contingent on the overarching goals of organizations. For example, the contrast between IBM’s social media strategy with that of Ajilitee’s (Sherman 2010) is reminiscent of a pull versus push strategy. IBM’s approach to the use of social media is based on its emphasis on individual interactions to build relationships by drawing customers toward its employees (www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html). In the domain of sales, IBM’s strategy still puts salesperson–customer relationships at its core and continues to focus on a long-term “relational selling” approach. Ajilitee aims to initiate customer interactions by driving promotional offers through networks of market participants. It is evident that in the above cases, salespeople would need to utilize different social media platforms and execute different communication processes to create value.
Competitive Intelligence

In an increasingly crowded marketplace, salespeople must effectively compete on service behaviors to satisfy customers and increase trust in relationships (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007). The efficacy of such behaviors largely depends on the salesperson’s competitive intelligence (Rapp, Agnihotri, and Baker 2011) about common customers, share-of-wallet, competitor pricing, and deployment of social media by competitors. Social media offers increased opportunities to gather competitive intelligence since competitors also offer digital content to customers and track their digital footprints. Competitors reveal digital content through online forums, FAQs (frequently asked questions), communities, B2B exchanges, employee blogs, public wikis, and so on. In reality, available information about competitors has increased manifold due to almost universal social media use by employees and organizations. Salespeople can learn more about competitors as well as customer reactions to their own and to competitor products.

Social media provide salespeople opportunities to observe competitors’ digital interactions with customers, access customer reactions to competitors, benchmark competitive products, and track competitor social media initiatives. On the flip side, astute competitors can also deploy similar strategies to learn more about the competitive marketplace. Once a salesperson has established a strong relationship with a particular customer, it opens avenues for gaining market intelligence. Researchers have recognized “scouting” as an indirect value function (e.g., Walter, Ritter, and Gemünden 2001) that refers to “the market and other information that can be acquired from the working environment through a particular customer” (Möller and Törrönen 2003, p. 110). Therefore, it is necessary to identify the sources and types of competitive intelligence most critical in enabling salesperson efforts at creating customer value and develop a formal strategy to gather such competitive intelligence.

Performance Metrics

In the case of social media use, it is very hard to track an organization’s progress. At the individual salesperson level, it can be even more challenging to evaluate efforts and outcomes. There are no industry standards or benchmarks available to appraise the salesperson’s use of social media. At the business organization level, recent survey results (Gleanster 2010) provide some insights into the methods firms are using to assess the performance of social media. Findings suggest that “audience growth rate” (e.g., number of Facebook fans or Twitter followers per week) is ranked as the top choice by firms as a performance assessment metric. Next was “customer engagement rate” (e.g., number of click-throughs or registrations per week). Other notable metrics were “volume of relevant posts/comments” and “customer acquisition rate.” In the SAP example mentioned earlier, the company refrained from defining ad hoc metrics to measure their social media success. Instead, they set the goals for each initiative. If attracting digital footfalls was their goal, then they measured only traffic to their blogs and other sites but did not measure the sales conversion ratio or other metrics. However, IBM’s “Listening for Leads” program, which charged its sales force to “go out there” and look for leads in multiple digital congregations, defined success by revenue in dollars generated through closed business (Fredricksen 2010).

The basic message for organizations is that they have to develop their own metrics, keeping in mind the purpose of social media use. In the salesperson context, a social media strategy must focus on both desired behaviors and outcomes. Sales managers need to provide clear information about performance evaluation criteria as well as associated rewards and punishments in order to keep salespeople satisfied and motivated (Challagalla and Shervani 1996). In the context of social media use, sales managers can set milestones in terms of salesperson efforts (e.g., number of tweets posted per week, number of blogs written and followed) and outcomes (e.g., number of leads generated through blogs). Performance evaluation should include objective (e.g., changes in service support costs) as well as subjective outcomes (e.g., number of referrals or positive recommendations by existing customers through social networks). Sales managers considering a social media investment should expect a reasonable ROI so that the investment can be justified.

Table 1 summarizes the above discussion, provides some examples of social media tools, and outlines a few challenges to the deployment of social media strategy.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Our framework of social media use by salespeople to enable service behaviors and value creation, and outlined social media strategy, offers numerous implications for sales managers and representatives. Our underlying thesis is that salespeople’s social media use can have a positive influence on service behaviors that influence value creation for customers as well as for salespeople. This theoretical model should help management convince their sales force to use social media strategically. Since sales organizations consider strong customer relationships a priority and view technology as a “viable option” (Ahearne et al. 2008), recognizing social media as a form of sales technology that can create value is a critical insight.

However, there is an important element of salesperson social media strategy that will demand retooling and new forms of
Table 1
A Strategic Approach Toward Social Media Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goals Delineation</td>
<td><strong>Blog</strong></td>
<td>Technology Reluctance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Web site in the format of an online journal developed and maintained by an individual or group of individuals</td>
<td>Sales organizations always find it hard to motivate salespeople to use sales technology effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Useful for expressing opinions, educating audience, initiating discussions related to brand, product, or service</td>
<td>Often, the most experienced salespeople are the most reluctant to use new technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Success depends on consistency, conversation style, content relevancy, etc.</td>
<td>Top-down approach of imposing social media use on the sales force can reduce productivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Exchange</td>
<td><strong>Microblogging (e.g., Twitter)</strong></td>
<td>Sales Process Interruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Microblogging and social networking service that is useful to put out news and posts, interact with your customers</td>
<td>Social media strategy needs to be integrated within current sales process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enables following of potential customers and knowing what people are trending and following</td>
<td>If information provided by salespeople lacks authenticity and relevance, use of social media can disrupt the sales process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Social Networks</strong></td>
<td>Without proper training and support from managers, salespeople might end up wasting many working hours, resulting in loss of actual selling time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online communities such as Facebook, Myspace, and LinkedIn provide a medium to get connected with people inside as well as outside the organization, engage in networks and communities</td>
<td>Undisciplined Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enables introductions or recommendations to prospects through friends and connections</td>
<td>Salespeople may not be consistent in terms of responding and updating the information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A quick and easy medium to expand prospect base and to follow the market trend</td>
<td>A very liberal approach can give opportunity to competition or dissatisfied customers to take control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>E-Communities/Discussion Forums</strong></td>
<td>Unrealistic Metrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Web sites offering platforms for customers to review, praise, and criticize products</td>
<td>Measuring the effort and outcomes of social media use could be challenging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Useful in finding out strengths and weaknesses of product/services</td>
<td>Evaluation criteria that does not align with business goals could create dissatisfaction among salespeople</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enables reading and commenting on reviews, clear out rumors/competition’s propaganda</td>
<td>Reachable objectives and pragmatic time allocation would be the key to success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
organizational support. Salespeople are accustomed to pushing information and products to channel members, relying on firm advertising to pull customers toward their products. In the new milieu, they may be expected to generate content and position themselves as “experts” to pull their customers. Firms should be prepared to shift resources to meet additional demands on salesperson time, provide technical support, and upgrade salesperson skills (e.g., writing, technology).

For managers and salespeople, the task is not complete even if a social media strategy has been devised. Constant attention and committed support from managers are necessary for salespeople to successfully implement the social media strategy. A salesperson’s job is considered challenging and multifaceted due to the confluence of several factors upon which the salesperson does not have any direct control. Managers should be prepared to offer support networks to help salespeople perform service behaviors.

Managers must be clear about results desired from social media use since this has important implications for its sales force. Also, realization of a strong social media strategy will require that participants at both operational and strategy levels internalize this philosophy. Using social media without outlining pragmatic and approachable goals may create sales productivity losses. Managers’ use of unrealistic metrics to evaluate social media efforts can have a very negative influence on salespeople’s motivation to use social media in the first place. Measuring the effort toward, and outcomes of, social media use could be challenging. It is important that managers set evaluation criteria that align with business goals, especially with the value perceived by customers and seller organizations. Otherwise, the use of social media can actually hamper sales performance and eventually lead to dissatisfaction.

Another key implication for managers is to promote the salespersons’ acceptance of social media. Managers always find it hard to motivate salespeople to use sales technology effectively and, notably, the most experienced salespeople are the most reluctant to use new technology. Top-level management generally expects sales managers to positively influence technology adoption by the sales force (Leonard-Barton and Deschamps 1988). However, managers constantly fear that the cost of technology implementation might outweigh the benefits received (Rigby and Ledingham 2004). In the case of social media, most of the tools have minimal financial cost, but entail significant resources in terms of employee time and effort. Often, this requires shifting a significant piece of the marketing budget to social media and creating positions with specialized responsibilities. For example, in 2009, businesses with an objective of gaining customer loyalty spent $88,000, on average (Direct Marketing Association 2010). However, to increase the probability of realizing desired strategic goals, managers must provide direction, encouragement, and feedback to the team dedicated to social media. Most important, the top-down approach of imposing social media use on the sales force can reduce productivity and should be avoided.

The responsibility for the success of social media strategy should not be limited to the sales department or salespeople but should also include customer support employees and the marketing department especially because of the fact that “customer value provides the foundation for all marketing activities” (Holbrook 1996, p. 138). Devising and executing an effective social media strategy will require close collaboration between sales and marketing. In addition, intraorganizational social networks facilitated by social media can make sales, service, and marketing integration efforts easier. This approach can not only bring marketing and sales units together but also help salespeople to understand the concept of value from a marketing perspective. Salespeople may employ social media networks to find help within organizations while they seek to create value for customers and for themselves.

In summary, there are a number of social media platforms and tools available for salespeople. We address the overwhelming fear that investments in social media do not directly translate into revenues and measurable sales outcomes by elaborating how social media facilitates salespersons’ value creation. However, it is important to ensure that social media tools are used strategically so as to complement the objectives of the sales organization. We have outlined a preliminary framework for understating how social media can help salespeople in creating value for their customers. We believe that the proposed framework and outlined social strategy will generate scholarly inquiry and influence managerial practice.

NOTES

1. We recognize that social media use will have a significant influence in B2C sales environments also. However, related expectations might differ depending on the sales context such as B2B and B2C. For the purpose of this research, we focus on the issue of social media use by salespeople in a B2B sales environment.

2. We use the term quasi-dichotomy since elements of content generation and connectivity are contained in both categories. However, user-generated content rely on a “pull”-type attraction, whereas networks are better suited for information “push” strategies.

REFERENCES


