

The Impact of Social Media and Related Technologies on the Sales Process: A Qualitative Analysis from the Buyer's Perspective

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Abstract

Recent advancements in technology such as the Internet, social media, and related technologies have altered the sales process so drastically that researchers are referring to it as a revolution in sales. Salespeople have garnered a substantial amount of focus in the literature since the sales process begins with sellers. However, there remains a dearth of research examining the buyer's perspective regarding the radical changes that have taken place in the sales process. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the impact these changes have had on the buyer's side of the sales exchange. Interviewing business-to-business purchasing professionals from a wide range of industries will provide a deeper understanding of the ramifications the technological changes are having on the purchasing side of the sales process. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with purchasing professionals by different researchers. Results will be analyzed using qualitative techniques designed to identify common themes that emerge from the data.

Improvements in technology are drastically changing the communication exchanges between buyers and sellers in the business to business (B2B) context. These changes are so radical that researchers have referred to the phenomenon as a revolution in sales (Marshall, Moncreif, Rudd, & Lee, 2012). Throughout history, sellers have quickly recognized the value of technological advancements in communication tools and adapted them so rapidly to the sales process that they have become known as "early adopters" (Christ & Anderson, 2011). As technological advances have progressed and been implemented, researchers have followed with thorough examination from the seller's perspective (Widmier, Jackson, & McCabe, 2002).

Although this revolution has garnered much consideration from researchers on the seller's side, there remains a dearth of research on the buyer's viewpoint. Buyers, or purchasing professionals, are experiencing similar ramifications from the drastic changes that have occurred in the sales process but the literature fails to

reflect the extent to which the purchasing professionals are being affected. Since the buyer's reaction to sellers is critical to the revenue generation for firms, their perspective warrants thorough study and understanding (Dixon, et al., 2005).

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to gain insight into the buyer's viewpoint on the changes technological advances have made on the purchasing process. Rather than attempting to quantify constructs, a qualitative approach will be taken with buyers engaging them in semi-structured interviews. This method is expected to lead to the identification of major themes as they emerge that will enhance understanding of the revolution in sales through the buyer's lens.

Salespeople are the primary connection firms have with buyers. When buyers evaluate sellers positively, immediate increases in sales can be experienced while negative evaluations by buyers result in diminished sales outcomes (Spiro, Perreault, & Reynolds, 1977; Doney & Cannon, 1997). The buyer's assessment of the seller is often the most important factor in a buyer's evaluation of a firm regardless of other factors (Jones, Moore, Stanaland, & Wyatt, 1998). Therefore, gaining the buyer's perspective on the impact of technological changes is important to consider.

Over the course of history, many changes have occurred in communication tools. Christ and Anderson (2011) traced the advancements for over the past hundred years and categorized the changes into three general categories: transportation technologies, oral communication technologies, and presentation technologies. As developments in each of these categories progressed, sellers adapted them to the sales process thereby impacting their communication capabilities with buyers. As telephone technology improved and replaced telegraphs, sellers adapted its use to improve communication with buyers. While sellers remained vigilant and responsive to the incremental improvements made in technology over the course of history, buyers have also countered by adapting these developments to the purchasing process.

Recently, modern technological developments such as the Internet, social media and virtual meeting platforms continue to impact the communication efforts between buyers and sellers (Widmier, Jackson, & McCabe, 2002). These developments have been explored by researchers over the past decades focusing on such topics as sales force automation (SFA) (eg., Rapp, Agnihotri, & Forbes, 2008), customer relationship management (CRM), sales technology usage (eg., Ahearne & Rapp, 2010). Buyers' reactions to and reciprocal uses of these recent modern technologies in the sales process is the focus of the current study.

Methodology

Questions will be adapted from Marshall, et al., (2012) and designed to capture the buyer's experience with regards to the impact of technological advancements on the buying process.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: Gain insight into the technological impact from a buyer's viewpoint on the purchasing process. This study is expected to enhance the understanding of the sales / purchasing process through the buyer's lens.

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