

The Use of Social Media by B2B companies in an Emerging Country: Evidence from Turkey

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v6-i10/2352>

Published Date: 19 October 2016

Abstract

This study contributes to the business-to-business (B2B) social media literature by providing an overview of the use, opportunities, and barriers surrounding B2B companies' social media efforts in an emerging country. The study uses semi-structured, individual interviews with executives from Top 100 private companies listed in Istanbul Chamber of Industry Top 500 Industrial Enterprises 2014 list. As the focus of the study was the companies operating wholly in B2B markets, the total number of interviewees was 18.

The data yielded mainly use reasons and revealed two important issues; information sharing and credibility building and developing business connections. Although social media is becoming important, today's B2B companies, use it only to enhance their customer reach, support sales and create awareness. Despite their interest in social media, other projects, measurement problems and lack of resources form the main barriers that hamper the adoption of social media in B2B sector. The study suggests that B2B companies should create unique content and keep customers/partners engaged with the brand and generate targeted leads. The study also provides insights into managers' reasons for using social media and gives guidelines for B2B marketers on how to conduct social media marketing.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Business To Business, Emerging Country, Emerging Markets

1. Introduction

Internet users spend more time on social media platforms than on any other website; that changes people's communication way and even daily activities, so companies have to be present, follow and expand their customer reach (Gopinath, 2010). Thus, companies witnessing the rise of social media started increasing their presence on multiple social media platforms. The use of social media channels has become a common practice for business-to-consumer (B2C) companies as these channels expand companies reach, help promotional campaigns and more importantly generate electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that creates economic, utilitarian, or social value for users and for companies (Angel and Sexsmith, 2009). Accordingly, academic world has extensively studied these channels in the B2C context.

However, concerning business-to-business (B2B) companies, especially industrial companies that operate wholly in B2B markets, even though social media use is increasing among them, they are still slow in adopting social media (Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides, 2011). Consequently, this paper probes the usage overview, opportunities and barriers that hamper the use of social media by B2B companies by investigating top 100 private companies listed in the Istanbul Chamber of Industry Top 500 Industrial Enterprises 2014 list (ICI magazine). Although there is some literature on the usage levels, barriers and metrics of social media marketing in B2B contexts (e.g. Järvinen, Tollinen, Karjaluoto & Jayawardhena, 2012; Michaelidou et al., 2011), this study contributes to the extant knowledge by taking into consideration an emerging country: Turkey. The study will also provide the underlying factors behind the use of social media and guidance for practicing managers how to develop better and more relevant social media marketing strategies in B2B context. To do this; common uses and the reasons to use social media, important issues in using social media and the barriers are investigated.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows; first a review of literature on the setting of objectives and the associated barriers to social media is presented. This will be followed by study methodology and findings. Finally, the implications and the conclusions will be discussed.

2. Literature Review

Social media channels are used by many B2B companies but as the research on this topic is focused on B2C companies, the role of social media in B2B sector, the industrial companies expectations, and goals need to be clarified. B2B companies, although they have invested in new channels and related marketing tools such as e-mail marketing, digital newsletters, and sales support materials (Barwise & Farley, 2005), they still hesitate to invest in social media tools.

The literature shows how important social media is for B2B companies (e.g., Shih, 2009; Safko, 2010; Wollan, Smith & Zhou, 2011; Barlow & Thomas, 2011; Hinchcliffe & Kim, 2012) and Kho (2008) argued that B2B companies might pursue many similar objectives to B2C firms. So, it can be suggested that as in the B2C sector, in B2B sector too, social media tools are better for creating awareness, building and supporting brands (Järvinen et al., 2012; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011; Laroche, Habibi & Richard, 2013; Christodoulides, 2009); influencing purchase decisions (Wang, Yu & Wei, 2012), generating word-of-mouth (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009) and sales leads (Bodnar and Cohen, 2012) and finally providing market data (Nunan and Yenicioğlu; 2013). Social media also takes in consideration customers as active participants in the communication process (Hennig-Thurau, Malthouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy & Skiera, 2010). In this way, social media enables companies to have conversations with customers and enhance customer relationships (e.g., Bemoff & Li, 2008; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011; Brennan & Croft, 2012). Especially, with its role in creation of knowledge sharing communities (Kasavana et al., 2011) and collaborative learning and creativity (Peppler & Solomou, 2011), social media strengthens customer relationships, improves customer satisfaction and loyalty. So, it is clear that B2B companies' objectives for employing social media are in line with the general objectives of marketing, additionally social media offer new horizons in developing customer relationships by engaging them in interactive discussions over brands and products (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Kho, 2008; Michaelidou et al., 2011;

Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). However, there are still some barriers to invest in social media for B2B companies.

Concerning the barriers to social media, the lack of control over messages in social media is considered as a major risk by most of these companies (Cruz & Fill, 2008). That stand back stems from the lack of general technical knowledge and personal innovativeness among managers and personnel as the social media pushes companies to create proper content (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2005; Schillewaert, Aheame, Frambach, & Moenaert, 2005; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). Moreover, the benefits of using social media, especially the return on investment (ROI), are underestimated or found to be irrelevant for B2B companies (Marshall, Sor, & McKay, 2000). So, under these circumstances many B2B companies decide not to invest in social media (Buehrer, Senecal & Pullins, 2005). However, the role of social media continues to increase even in B2B sector and B2B marketers have to profit from these channels that can bring significant benefits to their organizations even if it seems to be difficult to integrate social media into their marketing efforts. Thus, it is important to investigate their usage, objectives and challenges in an emerging country.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to bring out social media usage reasons of companies that wholly operate in B2B markets and to see how they perceive the potential, opportunities and challenges of using social media in Turkey.

Participants were drawn from Istanbul Chamber of Industry Top 500 Industrial Enterprises 2014 list. Among the first 100 private companies in this list, 51 were using social media channels (blogs, microblogs, wikis, discussion forums, social office tools, social networking sites, social bookmarking sites, video sharing services, photo sharing services, presentation sharing services) and only 18 of them were operating wholly in B2B markets, so they were chosen as the focus of this study. The survey was carried out in March 2015.

The research provided an in-depth examination of participants' perceptions of social media using semi-structured, individual interviews with executives to obtain the perspectives of participants regarding the goals of this study. These executives included marketing or public relations directors; they were those who had experience with integrating social media into their marketing campaigns. Of the interviewed executives, 4 were from the metal products and machinery sector, 3 electronics and electricity, 4 refining of metals, 3 mining, 2 petrochemicals, 1 was from cement industry and 1 was from forest industry sector. Before the interviews, participants were informed of the purpose and goals of this study, as well as the interview process (Creswell, 2009). The interviews lasted between sixty to ninety minutes, a semi-structured interview guide is used, and the interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

After all the interviews were completed and transcribed, the transcriptions were used to identify the key words that were similar among the participants. Bogdan and Biklen (2006) explained that this evolving process is a system used to find similarities among all the participants. As the data analysis progressed, the researcher's identification of key words and phrases were used to determine the important issues and the participants' perceptions as related to these issues.

4. Results and Discussion

The data yielded two significant issues related to interviewees' use of social media at their company. First issue covers information sharing and credibility building, second social media exposure and developing business connections.

The findings resulted from a qualitative research process, and, the process involved analyzing all the merged transcripts from a global perspective. Below are the results concerning the common uses and reasons of using social media, which were addressed by an analysis of the interview data. Then, the two important issues and barriers will be discussed.

The most commonly used social tools in order of importance for the companies were social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter), followed by video sharing site (Youtube), discussion forums, blogs and micro-blogs. Social networking sites were clearly the most commonly used approach according to the actual popularity of these sites.

Concerning the reasons of using social media by these B2B companies, the data indicated that the reasons include gaining exposure to trigger business connections, which builds an on-line presence, creates awareness and strengthens the brand and surely adds to the circle of influence of the company to provide support for sales. One interviewee stated that:

"We surely wish to support sales but we have to first raise awareness and strengthen our brand in these new platforms"

Other reasons involve obtaining insight into stakeholders' behaviors through the feedback that they provide to support other marketing related activities using the built-in analytics of some of the social media platforms, which allow for measurement of individuals' level of interest in a particular post. Finally, the ability to identify users' concerns, as a means to address them, and to promote the delivery of unique content also were reasons for the use of social media in marketing. One interviewee also specified that:

"Delivering content by traditional marketing or public relations methods is no longer efficient as in the past, particularly when compared to the social media".

4.1. Information sharing and Credibility Building

The interviewees indicated that their involvement in social media is strongly connected to information sharing and credibility building. Making connections with public and private companies, communities and other stakeholders provided the companies with greater information-sharing capabilities and enhanced their business credibility. When the interviewees shared their experiences, they described a multiplier effect of using social media platforms as a powerful way to engage with people/organizations of influence. The interviewees emphasized that social media engages followers who attract other individuals, who re-share, re-tweet, and like delivered content. This process, in the social media enabled the companies to become successful when employing creative marketing strategies especially based on corporate social responsibility and sustainability issues increasing the competitiveness and brand awareness of the company.

The interviewees also stated that through the various social media platforms, executives can reach across continents to find qualified employees and managers; they no longer feel restricted by geographic boundaries, and they easily fill these positions due to increased awareness and credibility of the company.

According to the data derived from the interviews, executives believe that social media is important as an innovative approach to marketing due to the uniqueness of content that the platforms are able to deliver. One interviewee emphasized that, when content is unique, it tends to drive credibility. Further, this uniqueness tends to engage the clients in a more

meaningful way, which could become the basis of revenue creation in future transactions. For example, one interviewee noted that offering followers a free webinar with unique content triggered a variety of business connections that eventually turned into sales.

4.2. Social Media Exposure and Developing Business Connections

The interviewees explained that global exposure is leveraging the company's reach into global markets. This involves the ability to market in continents that were previously difficult to reach. As noted by one participant, the leveraging of social media provides global exposure, which is one stimulus for revenue generation. Further, the ability to leverage social media as a medium for the development of products with global appeal also provides the potential to increase business revenue. One interviewee noted the usefulness of social media tools that allow for the creation of non-traditional forms of advertising into traditional marketing methods and can be used on a global basis. This global exposure in a B2B marketplace, through the various social media platforms, is a foundation for revenue generation. In this context, solving a particular problem posed by a partner/client was handled with much more urgency online than offline due to the company's high visibility as related to social media. Consequently, this issue, as noted by another interviewee, became the catalyst for developing custom software to more efficiently address customers' needs.

All interviewees also indicated that their involvement in social media is the foundation for developing business connections. They emphasized that building connections leads to the attracting of more referrals and followers, which can potentially increase revenue, especially in the long term for B2B companies. Social media allows for users' feedback through weigh-in, which is a measure of the level of interest of individuals. Companies, based on user feedback, customize the content that they post through the various social media platforms. So, one interviewee stated that companies should be engaged in social media and manage well the content and the communication process. The data indicated that companies that previously invested substantial resources in research and development efforts as a means to learn about customers' needs have now directed part of their focus to learning about such needs through the social media platforms. The data also indicated that communication for business exposure, defined as receiving business awareness and name recognition, allows companies to be positioned as informed thought leaders. One interviewee stated that one objective of a company is to elevate its status as an incredible source of information. Accordingly, interviewees indicated that social media helps them build a well-known brand and increase business revenue.

4.3. Barriers

According to interviewees, the most important barriers to adopt social media were, in order of popularity; companies' other projects being more important and difficulties in measuring or assessing the benefits for their business. Other reasons were a lack of successful case studies, lack of understanding of the opportunities, and lack of resources especially time and human resources.

These views are in line with earlier studies (e.g. Ramsey, 2010) which found that lack of knowledge or understanding, measurement of performance and lack of resources especially time and human resources as common barriers against social media. So, clearly the lack of understanding the benefits and possibilities, and the difficulties of measuring the benefits seem common with other studies that did not focus on B2B use of social media.

5. Discussion

The study findings comprise new information that adds to and strengthens the existing literature. The interviewees believed that social media helped them to engage with both existing and potential clients, some of whom are people/organizations of influence. In this way, B2B companies can develop creative social media marketing strategies. As Turow (2006) noted social media is able to empower consumers to access, send, transform, create, store and share materials online, so it is very important to use a multiplier effect for effective engagement. Social media messages must be optimized for viral functionality; that is, the message must be easy to share with the recipients' contacts and to post on social media networks.

As stated by interviewees, the pressure for problem resolution is in line with Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011) who stated that consistent listening, although time-consuming, can lead to a successful market-focused orientation.

Channey (2010), stated that most marketers utilize popular channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn as well as blogs to increase the extent of their brand reach, among other goals even if it has a long way to go. The interviewees indicated that one of the reasons to use social media is to trigger business connections, a practice that builds their online presence through name recognition and for business exposure. Social media tools can effectively engage professional audiences to promote the company through their social networks to easily reach international human resources. Referrals are crucial elements of a company's reputation and generation of new partners in B2B environment, and it's a marketing strategy that can be built around taking care of existing customers/partners and reaching their network.

6. Implications

The findings of this study have multiple implications. The results indicated that B2B companies view social media as a supplementary tool to sustain their business. This notion is seen in the research of Yost (2010), who noted the need to accompany the use of the various social media channels by comprehensive websites and avenues by which consumers can be invited back into the companies' websites. Organizations appear to understand that marketing is an integrated approach that requires the use of multiple marketing strategies, both online and offline. Costa (2010:1-3) stated that marketing managers must be knowledgeable about how different social media platforms can add substance to their integrated marketing strategies. For example, Twitter followers can be directed to Facebook, Facebook likers can be encouraged to visit the company's YouTube channel, and YouTube comments can automatically feed into the company blog, and so on. Each platform generates insights into customers, which can improve the business development process and result in targeted marketing approaches, better content customization, higher levels of engagement, and expanded brand reach.

The common uses of social media include identifying the target market and analyzing a platform's capabilities and potential users' reach. Other practices include assessing whether organizations have the necessary content to keep users entertained and engaged with the brand and leveraging the various social media platforms by customizing content and designing different social media strategies based on the individual platform.

One interviewee stated that the high engagement created around promoting various events through social media helps the company to achieve a global market reach and increase its customer base. Promoting events through social media creates engagement and builds trust

and credibility. Similarly, the use of analytics allows companies to deliver meaningful content and serves as the foundation for generating targeted leads. Nevertheless, companies may use social media differently based on their goals, the industry, and their target market.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study took an in-depth look at how B2B companies use social media in Turkey to connect with customers/partners and to reach their goals. Academically, this study adds to the extant knowledge about the usage, opportunities, potential and challenges of social media in B2B context, in an emerging country: Turkey. This has so far been studied in different countries with survey approaches, and in the study of Michaelidou et al. (2011), from branding and social network sites' perspective, which is only a small part of social media.

The results can be used, by managers, to better understand the features of B2B related social media, and especially the various platforms use, which are currently superficially understood. Also, due to the relatively low current active use of social media, the B2B companies might benefit from these insights. There is potential in social media to gather valuable information from partners/customers and their networks. Also, B2B companies, with the competition in the market and the advances in communication tools, will face increased pressures from existing and future partners/customers to interact via these platforms. B2B organizations that intend to adopt social media should seek to enhance their managers' perceptions about the usefulness of social media, and eliminate the perceived barriers by using social media platforms effectively and developing successful case studies to encourage presence in social media. Accordingly, it is important to focus future studies on ways to tie sales to particular social media marketing activities to justify budget allocation to social media marketing.

Acknowledgement

This research is supported by Galatasaray University, Scientific Research Projects Commission under project number 16.102.001

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