

Assessing Factors Associated to Social Media Adoption Among Salespeople of Environmental Services Company in Malaysia

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Abstract

There is an increasing trend of online purchasing among business-to-business organizations. This study focuses on one of the companies which operated in an environmental services industry in Malaysia. The study aims to assess any significant correlation between the salespeople' age, social media norms and customer-oriented selling with social media adoption. The social media adoption refers to as the salespeople' intention to use social media in selling. The study utilized a survey method and the questionnaire as distributed to 18 sales personnel of the company's Business Development Department. The result of the correlation analysis shows that there was a significant and strong positive correlation between social media norms and social media adoption. However, there was no significant relationship between salespeople' age and customer-oriented selling with social media adoption. A practical implication of the study is addressed, followed by suggestions for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

It is, indeed, due to rapid technological changes, organizations must consistently search for new ways to listen, respond and engage their customers in conversation (Moriarty et al., 2015). Kotler and Armstrong (2014) emphasize that in the context of business to business (B2B) marketing process, on-line purchasing, or often known as e-procurement has overgrown following the advances in information technology. The online platform offers the marketers many benefits in which they can virtually share marketing information, sell products and services, provide customer support services and maintain ongoing customer relationships. The launch of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other vehicles for sharing thoughts, photos and even videos have radically altered the structure of consumer communication (Moriarty et al., 2015, p. 48). Accordingly, sales professionals need to be an active social media user to connect and build a long-term relationship with their customers (Schaub, 2014).

Social Media is defined as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). On the other hand, social media marketing refers to the process of marketing through social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Nations, 2019). As stated by Nations (2019), by utilizing the social aspect of the web, social media marketing can connect and interact on a much more personalized and dynamic level than through traditional marketing.

This study was focusing on a B2B company which involves selling of products and services related to the environmental sustainability that supported the enforcement of relevant government law and regulation in Malaysia. The company engaged in establishing, operating and maintaining an integrated environmental quality monitoring network to monitor air and river water quality.

The company has been in the business for more than 15

years. According to Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (2010), the environmental goods and services industry in Malaysia can generally be divided into two main categories, namely, the supply of environmental equipment and provision of environmental services.

The environmental market in Malaysia is principally driven by federal laws and regulations, self-imposed international standards of multinational corporations, and the budgets of federal, state and local government, as well as the demand for and provision of basic environmental infrastructure services. The Malaysia Department of Environment (DOE) has been established in 1974. It is one of the departments under the Ministry of Energy, Science, Technology, Environment & Climate Change. The mission of DOE is to ensure sustainable development in the process of nation-building (DOE, 2019). DOE is responsible in implementing the National Policy on the Environment (DASN) which has been established for continuous economic, social and cultural progress and enhancement of the quality of life of Malaysians through environmentally sound and sustainable development (DOE, 2019).

The environmental business can be highly specialized, and the industry players need to possess in-depth technological know-how to stay ahead of the competition. The Malaysia environmental market size has grown from RM 7.8 billion in 2010 to RM 11.6 billion in 2015, giving an average growth of 8% per annum (DOSM, 2018). Based on the Compendium of Environment Statistics 2018 (DOSM, 2019), in 2015, the total environmental protection expenditure by sector in Malaysia was RM 2.6 billion. 73.6% of the expenditure was from the manufacturing sector, and 11.3% was from the service sector. The total expenditure on environmental protection of the mining and quarrying sector and the construction sector was 6.9% and 6.4% respectively.

As the market is getting more competitive, the needs to broadening the company's customers base are crucial. In this case, the company plans to use the social media platform as one of its marketing and selling tools. Apart from choosing the appropriate social media to be utilized, the company was concerned about its salespeople' willingness and readiness to engage in utilizing the platform.

The objectives of this study were thus, to assess any significant relationship between salespeople' age, social media norms, and customer-oriented selling with social media adoption. The research questions for this

study were: i) Is there any significant inverse relationship between salespeople' age and their intention to use social media in selling? ii) Is there any significant positive relationship between social media norm and salespeople' intention to use social media in selling? and iii) Is there any significant positive relationship between customer-oriented selling and social media adoption?

Although, in the business context, the social media adoption can be a 'top-down' instruction, understanding any correlation between the salespeople' profiles and their 'intention to use' social media as a selling platform for products and services is regarded as vital. The findings of this study are expected to add on the literature in social media use in B2B domain. According to Jussila et al. (2014), the existing researches on social media are mostly focused on business-to-customer (B2C) context. The use of social media in companies which fully operate in B2B market is thus, not well understood. Managerially, the findings of this study may assist the company in developing appropriate strategies towards the effective implementation of social media in business. As Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 67) addressed, using social media is not an easy task, and this may require new ways of thinking, but the potential gains are far from being negligible.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literatures (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Siamagka et al., 2015; Breslauer & Smith, 2009) showed that B2B organizations use social media for many reasons. These include to build and enhance customer relationships, establish groups of networks, deliver content and getting feedback from their customers or prospects. According to Schaub's work (2014), 75% of B2B buyers and 84% of vice president (VP) executives surveyed use social media to make purchasing decisions. It was found that the average B2B buyer who uses social media for buying support is more senior, has a bigger budget, makes more frequent purchases, and has a greater span of buying control than a buyer who does not use social media.

The past study indicated that a company's decision in creating a presence in a social media platform have no assurance that its implementation will create value (Culnan et al., 2010). Culnan et al. (2010, p. 246), highlighted that the effective implementation of social media consisted of the following three elements: First, organizations need to make a "mindful decision" regarding initial adoption; subsequently, because social media are essentially communication systems, organizations need to build communities; and finally, they need to develop absorptive

capacity so they can learn from the content their customers generate.

This present study focused on the first element as the company planned to adopt the social media platform as one of the tools in creating a relationship with their potential customers and to help the company in generating future sales. According to Culnan et al. (2010), making a ‘mindful decision’ regarding initial adoption of social media, which include selection and configuration, deployment and exploitation are critical to an organization. ‘Mindfulness’ is defined as adopting the “right” innovation at the “right” time and in the “right” way across all phases of implementation.

Culnan et al. (2010, p. 246) further explained that there are five elements of mindfulness, which applies to social media adoption, namely:

- i. Making a good decision about which platform(s) to adopt and how they should be used
- ii. Assigning responsibility for governance
- iii. Identifying metrics to measure value
- iv. Making sure all applications are readily accessible
- v. Managing risks

In this present study, the roles of salespeople are vital in assisting the company towards effective implementation of social media. This is addressed in the above second element, namely, ‘Assigning Governance Responsibility’. In detail, as mentioned in Culnan et al. (2010) work, all the related departments namely, the information technology, corporate communication, marketing and customer service have their own role in ensuring effective social media application.

It was evident that people who use social media for private usage will be more inclined to use social media for business purposes (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015). In this context, younger salespeople representing the Generation Y (born between 1981-1999) who have grown up with technology are expected to have better skills with the digital environment; hence, they are believed to be more inclined towards social media usage (Bolton et al., 2013). The past study indicated a negative relationship between salespeople’ age and social media usage (Schultz et al., 2012). Following this, it is expected that there is an inverse significant relationship between salespeople’ age and their intention to use social media in selling.

Groza et al. (2012) found that companies with good interdepartmental cooperation will influence their sales force to use social media. In the context of social media usage, it was found that B2B salespeople are more likely to use social media for selling when people who are vital to them believe that they should be using social

media. The identified groups that will likely influence the salespeople behavior towards using the social media are the immediate superior, external customers, competitors and intra-organizational peer salespeople (Schultz et al., 2012). This is in line with the findings of previous research that suggests individuals will comply with the expectation of the group of people that can reward or punish them for non-behavior (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Therefore, it is postulated that social media norm will be significantly and positively correlated to salespeople’ intention to use social media in selling.

The next related variable is customer-oriented selling. By definition, customer-oriented selling is the behavior of the salespeople and the overall sales department towards enhancing their service quality and customer satisfaction (Martin & Bush, 2003). The use of social media will enable salespeople to grow their social networks and develop the right contacts and make their presence felt among the customers who will help to build familiarity and eventually increase the trust between the sellers and the potential buyers. Hence, it is expected that customer-oriented selling will be significantly and positively correlated to social media adoption Figure 1 presents the research framework of the study.

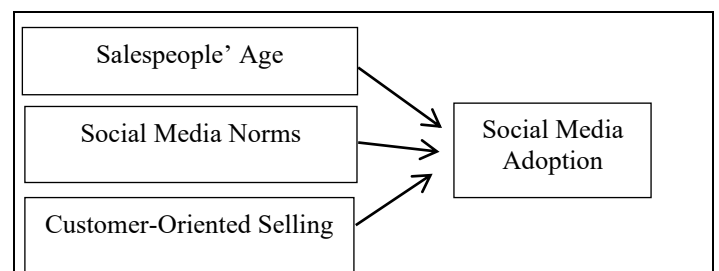


Figure 1: Research Framework
(Source: Adapted from Schultz et al., 2012)

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a survey method. A questionnaire was designed to gather primary data from the salespeople of the company. The salespeople team consist of the senior manager, manager, and sales executive of the Business Development Department of the company. As the total population was small, i.e. 18 members, and to get higher responses, the questionnaire was personally distributed to each of the sales personnel at their office. The completed questionnaire was then collected by the researchers. The total returned questionnaire was 18, which indicates a 100% response rate.

The items of the constructs were adapted from Schultz et al. (2012). Social media norm was measured

by 5-items which include ‘I believe the company’s senior management encourages the use of social media for sales’ and ‘The company’s customers and potential customers use social media to buy’. The customer-oriented selling was measured by 5 items. The items included ‘A good salesperson has to have the customer’s best interests in mind’. Social media adoption was referred to the salespeople’s intention to use social media in selling and this was measured by a single item, namely, ‘I will use social media for selling’. All the items were measured using 7-point Likert Scale (1 = Strong Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree).

4.0 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Table 1 highlights the summary of the respondents’ profiles. The findings indicated that 61.1% of the respondents are male, and 38.9% are female. The majority of the respondents held the executive’s position and with years of sales experience between 1-7 years. 44.4% of the respondents age ranged from 18 to 29 and the same percentage represented those aged 30 to 49. 94.4% of the respondents own personal social media account, and the majority of them use Facebook, followed by LinkedIn. The findings showed that the vast majority of the respondents were familiar with various social media platforms.

Table 1: Respondents’ Profiles

Respondents’		n= 18	%
Gender	Male	11	61.1
	Female	7	8.9
Age group	18-29 years	8	44.4
	30-49 years	8	44.4
	50 and above	2	11.2
Job level	Senior Manager	3	16.7
	Manager	3	16.7
	Executive	12	66.6
Total years of sales experience	Less than 1 year	5	27.8
	1-7 years	8	44.4
	8 – 15 years	3	16.7
	Above 15 years	2	11.1
Do you have any personal social media account?	Yes	17	94.4
	No	1	15.6
Which social media account(s) do you have?	Facebook	17	94.4
	LinkedIn	10	55.6
	Twitter	5	27.8
	Blogs	3	16.7
	YouTube	6	33.3
	Instagram	7	38.9

The Cronbach Alpha score for social media norm and customer-oriented selling were .62 and .60 respectively. Descriptive analysis was run to get the mean score of each item of the constructs and a correlation analysis was carried out to answer the research questions addressed.

Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics of the measurement items. The total mean scores for social media norm was 4.36 and all the items of the construct recorded a mean score of above 4.00. This suggested that the respondents agreed that cultivation of social media norm requires involvement from top management of the company, the head of departments, the salespeople and the customers.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Items of the Constructs

Construct	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Media Norm (5 items)	I believe the company’s senior management encourages the use of social media for sales.	4.44	1.76
	I believe the company’s head of department is not afraid of letting employees to use social media.	4.11	1.71
	The company’s customers and potential customers use social media to buy.	4.22	1.52
	Most of the company’s competitors use social media to get contact with customers.	4.33	1.37
	Most of the salespeople in the company will be able to use social media for selling.	4.67	1.37
Customer-Oriented Selling (5 items)	I try to get customers to discuss their needs with me.	5.61	1.46
	A good salesperson has to have the customer’s best interests in mind.	6.50	0.71
	I try to identify product that helps solve the customers’ problem.	6.11	0.76
	I offer the company’s product that is best suited to the customer’s problem.	6.11	0.83
	I try to find out what kind of product would be most helpful to a customer.	6.06	1.47
Social Media Use Intention (1 item)	I will use social media for selling purpose.	4.67	1.28

Note: n = 18

The highest mean score (4.67) was recorded for the item on ‘Most of the salespeople in the company will be able to use social media for selling’. The lowest mean score of the items was on ‘I believe the company’s head

of department is not afraid of letting employees to use social media' (4.11). For customer-oriented selling, the lowest and the highest mean scores of the items were 5.61 ('I try to get customers to discuss their needs with me') and 6.50 ('A good salesperson has to have the customer's best interests in mind') respectively. The overall mean score of the construct was 6.08. This indicated the presence of customer-oriented selling philosophy among the respondents. The findings were encouraging as it is importance for the sales personnel to be 'customer-centric'. These findings suggested that the respondents will do their best in serving their customers. They are likely to adopt any new technology in building a relationship with their customers, and social media is one of the platforms for this.

Social media adoption was measured by a single item and the mean score of the item was 4.67. The score indicated that the respondents were willing to use social media as a platform for selling the company's products and services to their existing and potential customers.

The results of the correlation analysis were highlighted in Table 3. The Spearman correlation analysis indicated that there was no significant correlation between age and the salespeople's intention to use social media in selling ($\rho = .14$, $p = .59$). The result of Pearson correlation analysis showed that social media norm and social media adoption was positively correlated ($r = .63$, $p < .010$). The analysis also indicated that there was no significant relationship between customer-oriented selling and the salespeople' intention to use social media in selling ($r = .36$, $p = .15$).

Table 3: The results of correlation analysis

	Social Media Adoption	Mean	SD
1. Social Media Adoption		4.67	1.28
2. Age ^a	.14		
3. Customer-Oriented Selling	.36	6.08	0.68
4. Social Media Norms	.63*	4.36	1.00

Note: *Significant at: $p < 0.01$; ^a Respondents' age group (ordinal scale)

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Commonly, the industrial B2B market has fewer customers. The purchase of industrial products or services is made by professional purchasing personnel.

They used to seek for complete information about the products or services, and objectively evaluate them (Jussila et al., 2014). In the era of interactive media, the use of social media may facilitate the company in building a relationship with its customers by providing essential information to them about the company's products and services.

Based on the findings of descriptive analysis, one can be observed that the salespeople' intention to use social media in selling was promising. This was indicated by the mean score of social media adoption. The salespeople' age was found as not significantly correlated to social media adoption. This may due to the nature of the business in which it requires each salesperson regardless of their age to be both technically and technologically sound. In other words, this has somewhat shaped the salespeople team to be technologically inclined and social media savvy.

Based on the survey finding, the percentage of junior and senior salespeople of the Business Development Department of the company was considered about equally distributed. Generally, for senior salespeople, they have more years of sales experience, more exposures, and vast business networks. The young salespeople, on the other hand, may have limited business experience but could have greater exposure to technology from an early age. As age does not matter, a strong positive relationship between social media norms and social media adoption may take place quicker, as senior salespeople that use social media will be able to motivate the junior salespeople to follow suit or vice-versa. This is in line with what has been quoted earlier: for effective implementation of social media, organizations need to build communities, because social media are essentially communication systems (Culnan et al., 2010).

The result suggests that the stronger the social media norms within the company, the stronger the salespeople' intention to use social media in selling. Thus, making the use of social media as an interactive medium in doing business should be one of the priorities of the company, particularly to the Business Development Department. The cultivation of such norms and culture may accelerate the social media adoption rate among the salespeople. Further, for effective social media adoption, the management may need to consider providing developmental training to enhance their team's skills and also to enable them to appreciate the benefits of using social media in a B2B environment Siamagka et al. (2015). Customer-oriented selling was not

significantly correlated to social media adoption among the sales people of the company. However, based on the findings of the descriptive analysis, there was a strong indicator on the presence of customer-oriented selling approach among the respondents. Consequently, although social media adoption was not correlated to customer-oriented selling, there is a big opportunity for the company to encourage their sales people to utilize social media in doing business, because a good sales person will always keep their customers' best interests in mind. As addressed in the literature section, the past survey showed that 75% of B2B buyers use social media to make purchasing decisions. This signified the B2B customers' preferences on social media platform.

This study is not without limitation. The main limitation is the sample size of the study, which was considered as small. In order to get more responses, the questionnaire was distributed to all 18 salespeople of the company; and all responded. This gave 100% response rate. Nonetheless, due to the small number of samples i.e. 18, the results of the study should not be generalized to any other companies and industries. Future studies may look into measuring the actual social media adoption rate among the sales personnel and its effect on the sales performance.

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