

## Effect of Combined Use of social media, Digital, and Traditional Communication Tools in the Business-to-Business Sales Process of Multinational Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)

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### Abstract

Social media and digital networks have gradually changed how firms sell themselves. In a world where technology is permeating society more and more, understanding how sales teams use business-to-business (B2B) markets can provide insight into the motivations driving the selling process. In the three crucial stages of the B2B sales process, this study investigates how global SMEs use traditional, digital, and social media sales communication methods.

The paper's use of grounded theory shows how social media may be quite effective in luring clients from outside. The effective phase appears to be where digital communication tools are most common, whereas customer relationship management still favours more conventional communication methods. Nevertheless, certain important potential boundary circumstances, like relationship culture and closeness to a location, technology, the strategic value of the consumer, creativity, and capital, appear to have an impact on how international SMEs employ a range of communication channels when conducting business. To assist foreign SMEs with their sales communication, designers provide a method for understanding the flow of the B2B sales process.

**Keywords:** *Business-to-Business; SMEs; Social Media*

### Introduction

The way organisations communicate and sell has undergone a paradigm shift as a result of the ongoing development of digital tools. By utilising social networking sites, technologies, internet analytics, and search engine marketing, particularly in cross-border transactions, business-to-business (B2B) selling has been redesigned (Barratt & Rosdahl, 2002). A social media plan is essential for considering both the effectiveness assessment method and all platform-specific factors, which has several advantages for a business (Hilong, 2023). With direct internet access to massive amounts of data and a thorough grasp of customer preferences, salespeople may now more successfully focus on the most lucrative aspects of managing client connections and global business possibilities. Companies that embraced digital media saw a 40%–60% decrease in operational costs and a five-fold increase in revenue over the past five years compared to their competitors. Furthermore, geographical barriers have decreased significantly, making it easier for companies to conduct international business.

### Review of Literature

Recent studies show how social networking sites are becoming more crucial for sales and advertising operations in a variety of business settings. Representatives are using social media more and more in

their profession, especially for key account management and to help with consumer segmentation for business purchases. Businesses continue to rely on traditional and digital tools for sales marketing despite increasingly adopting social networking sites to communicate with prospects and add value, which results in an unbalanced selection of communication channels. Recent studies have examined the incorporation of various selling communication gadgets, the impact of social networking sites, and the impact of effective advertising on specific customer metrics with a focus on their temporally variable effectiveness and by illuminating their prospects' impacts on brand development and acquiring new clients.

### Different Sales Communication Tools in the Sales Process:

The majority of past business-to-consumer (B2C) sectors have been the subject of most studies, Even findings on media segmentation and the usage of social media sites to promote and market.

It is necessary to do scholarly study in the field of the application of media platforms and other communication channels in the field of marketing for companies that operate in B2B marketplaces. Wiesel, Pauwels, and Arts (2011) looked into how small- and medium-sized businesses (SME) used multichannel management, illustrating cross-channel effects including those of statistics for web funnels on offline transactions. According to the survey, consumer relationships that start online have a big effect on a company's bottom line. These results may also be relevant to the social media communication context, where the contagiousness of user interaction may be combined with other communication tools and help businesses sell to other businesses.

**Table1:** Relevant empirical international marketing and sales studies analyzing the combination of different sales communication tools in the sales process

Most relevant empirical Context research studies	Context	Relation to B2B sales context?	International Business Context	Integration of different sales communication tools?
Kumar <i>et al.</i> , 2013	B2C sales of single large company in the United States.	No	No	Yes
Kumar & Raheja, 2017	B2C sales of a single large company.	No	No	Yes
de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2017	Customer acquisition of a single telecom firm operating in one European country (B2C level).	No	No	Yes
Luo & Bu, 2016	Firm-level across 27 emerging economies enterprises	No	Yes	No
Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013	A single multinational's global virtual teams.	No	Yes	No
Rapp <i>et al.</i> , 2013	Employees, retail channel partners and consumers of a globally operating brand.	Yes	No	No
This study	Integrated use of social media, digital, and traditional sales communication tools in the B2B sales process of international SMEs.	Yes	Yes	Yes

Past analysis (Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson & Pullins, 2021) has shown that using social networking sites and online equipment for sales marketing boosts the effectiveness of sales operations in B2B organisations. Since the use of social media affects a company's ability to communicate and do business, this is especially true for SMEs. Despite these encouraging results, new research indicates that the impact of online media technologies on patronage depends on the circumstances. Significant results demonstrate the potential of social media for B2B sales operations, but researchers do not yet know how SMEs integrate social media with other transmission platforms across the many phases of the B2B sales

process or what benefits this integration produces (Wardati & Mahendrawathi, 2019). The conceptual and practical management of multichannel communication by businesses for commercial sales at each stage of the sales process must be understood. In actuality, the progress of electronically mediated commercial communication has revolutionised not only the selling process but also made it easier to access the worldwide market. In light of this, it is important to look into how sales communication tools are structured and used during foreign sales. With the development of technology, SMEs now have more opportunities to compete in markets that they previously might not have had access to.

Recent discoveries have also not been independently validated in larger contexts. Consumers do not fully understand the impact of social media sites and other marketing communication strategies on the stages of international businesses' B2B sales processes (Grewal *et al.*, 2015, Cartwright, Liu & Raddats, 2021). Therefore, the primary goal of this research is to examine the drawbacks of utilising many sales communication strategies at once, such as social media, digital technology, and traditional communication tools, in the B2B sales process stages of multinational SMEs. The essay is the first to explain how and why the suitability of different sales communication methods, including social media, varies both inside and among the crucial stages of a B2B sales process.

### **Qualitative Approach:**

A qualitative technique is appropriate for this study since it aims to comprehend how communication devices work and the sales process functions and because no relevant theories have been developed. The designers identified reasons and situations that may lead to variances in how organisations mix social, digital, and traditional sales communication tools at different phases of the sales process by performing an exploratory study based on a grounded-theory method in a B2B worldwide scenario. The method gives a platform for additional inquiry into the subject.

Companies contribute to the corpus of knowledge in the field of international marketing and sales by:

- (1) Being the first to appropriately depict the usage of traditional, digital, and social media tools for marketing interaction by multinational SMEs at each stage of a business to business (B2B) selling process.
- (2) Highlighting for global SMEs the benefits of incorporating during and after the B2B sales process phases, Social networking sites and other methods for sales communication are employed.
- (3) Outlining the boundaries for incorporation and discussing whether the procedure should be contextualised in light of certain traits found in other nations.
- (4) Constructing a design for the joint use of traditional tools for sales marketing, digital technology, and social media by global SMEs.
- (5) Making a failed sales campaign recommendation depend on what practitioners have reported.

Table 1 lists the most important international marketing and sales studies that examine the problem. The research deficit is made clear by analysing the literature. By offering a qualitative assessment of the integration of sales communication technologies and their effects on the B2B sales process, this study seeks to bridge the gap in the use of these tools throughout the B2B sales processes of multinational SMEs.

Salespeople use a variety of sales communication tools during the sales process as a result of the quick development of technology and the expansion of the sales function. Social media has become one of the mediums that management and academic institutions are becoming more interested in.

According to the degree of digitization, the sales communication tools are divided into three categories for this study. The designers classified and categorised several sales communication methods, ranging from non-digital to social media, as follows:

(I) Using 'conventional' sales communication methods such as in-person interactions, phone calls, and letter delivery.

(II) Emails, websites, SEO, online talking and conferencing services (Other "digital" sales communication platforms, such as Skype, WhatsApp, and Google Hangouts, as well as

Social media, which Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define as "a collection of Internet-based applications that expand on the theoretical and technological foundations of Web 2.0," can be used to create and share user-generated content. Social media is different from earlier digital technologies mostly because of how dynamic and participatory it is, allowing material sharing, co-creation, and editing by users. In this essay, the word "social media use" refers to interactions between many people (such as companies and clients, companies and other businesses, etc.) on websites like social networking sites, blogs, and content communities.

### **Role of Social Media:**

Social media platforms are founded on a technology ecology that enables a variety of users spread throughout the globe to engage in social interactions (e. g. individuals, firms, institutions, etc.). Salespeople and marketers leverage the viral message produced by social media engagement to emphasise the company's benefits over rivals. According to Wang, Pauleen and Zhang (2016)'s findings, SMEs involved in business-to-business transactions can use social media to enhance communication and commercial performance. In fact, social media may support salesmen in their daily activities. Lacoste (2016), for instance, provided an example of how account managers' use of social media benefited their efforts to manage client relationships. This is especially important given how relationship based B2B selling is. According to a 2011 study by Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides, B2B businesses adopt social media more slowly than B2C businesses do because of the ambiguities surrounding its use. This can be attributed to the fact that the contracts are frequently significant, and the commodities are more asset-specific, both of which require highly motivated sales employees. Because of this, salespeople usually select a wide range of sales communication techniques when attempting to market to business clients. In order to manage their diversity and research their use, it is helpful to recognise and group the major types of marketing communication tools.

By observing salespeople's regular activities as early as 1999, Evenson and colleagues were able to show how digital technologies alter the diversity of selling actions that must be performed in order to create a successful sales performance. The authors highlighted the differences between current "nontechnology" face-to-face sales communication methods and digital techniques, which include emails, the Internet, voicemails, faxes, Web pages, newsletters, and audio-video conference capabilities, among many other forms of digital communication. According to Moncrief and Marshall (2005), emerging technologies can function as catalysts for the traditional seven phases of selling described by Dubinsky, Ingram, and Rudelius (1985) to change into a completely new, more complex sales process. Although recent literature has called for more investigation into how social media and other digital technologies affect the marketing process, there is still little information in this field. It is crucial to update and advance the stages of the sales process by taking technological advancement into account, as well as to take into account any potential implications that selling on a global scale may have on the process itself. It is critical to keep in mind that the introduction of social media may have an impact on the entire sales process as we work to better understand what the boundary criteria are for such integration, how new communication tools are blended with conventional sales communication tactics, etc.

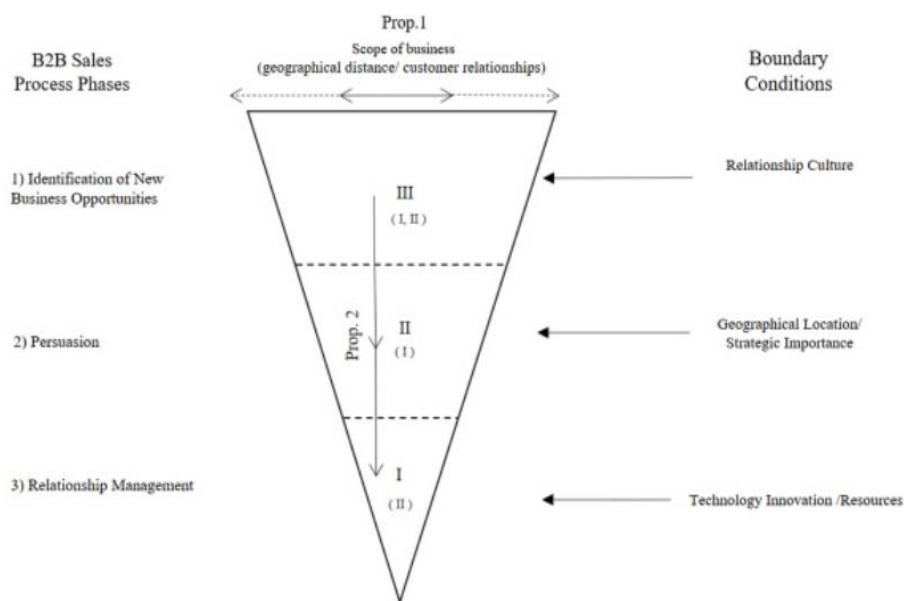
## Discussion

Recent studies have examined the advantages of combining traditional and digital advertising, social media marketing in terms of customer spending, cross-purchase behaviour, and brand success. These businesses can gain a better understanding of the procedures involved in effective sales and business growth by learning how B2B organisations apply these technologies to their sales operations.

This study's grounded-theory technique identified new business opportunity identification, persuasion, and relationship management as the three main stages of a sales process for global SMEs engaged in the service industry. In other industries or larger organizations, the seven phases recommended by Dubinsky, Ingram and Rudelius (1985) should be contrasted with this shortened selling process. Theoretically, the selling process progresses from enticing prospects to converting them into clients and establishing transactional or strategic corporate partnerships.

Using empirical data and the grounded-theory methodology, the designers built a framework for the integrated use of sales communication tools by multinational SMEs during the B2B sales process (Cao, & Weerawardena, 2023; Bodlaj & Čater, 2022). Future research will build on this paradigm in order to better comprehend this little-researched phenomenon.

This empirical investigation identified two separate levels of integrated tool utilisation in a B2B sales procedure: I, those occurring inside each stage, and (ii) those occurring across the phases. The companies under investigation took a variety of steps to benefit from both levels of utilization.



**Source:** Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson & Pullins, 2021

**Figure 1:** Integrated Use of Sales Communication Tools in the B2B Sales Process

B2B organisations are beginning to use online marketing communication tools and social networking sites for business reasons as a result of B2C companies' ongoing use of these platforms; nevertheless, their implementation of these technologies appears to be somewhat less advanced than that of B2C companies. Investigators found that social media networks such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube facilitate the continuous search for new business prospects. The interviews gave rise to the idea that social media tools may be used strategically to reach more local and foreign prospects while spending less money on the process of identifying new business opportunities. Additionally, none of the businesses offered the ability to do direct sales on social media. This prevented the channel conflict that Lawrence *et al.* (2019) hypothesised but did not show in this data, which was derived from interviews with B2B businesses. Instead, it became clear that integrating social media with

traditional sales techniques (both for prospecting and promotion purposes) was seen as a highly effective strategy to improve the company's hunt for new business prospects.

Recent studies have taken into account social media in addition to conventional offline and online resources, emphasising its value as the mainstay of businesses' marketing and sales tools. Models that highlight the benefits of social media for businesses operating in business-to-consumer (B2C) activities, spell out the stage's customers take when making purchases, and combine it with traditional and digital marketing tools have sparked. These initiatives are a response to repeated calls for more investigation into the consequences of multichannel marketing. However, organisations engaged in international B2B transactions have traditionally been disregarded in this field of research. As a result of research, there is still a lack of theoretical knowledge about how social media and other sales communication tools affect sales on international markets. It is surprising that there hasn't been more research on these tools given their increased popularity and the potential advantages they offer to both managers and organisations. The Marketing Science Institute Research Council's general recommendations for the years 2020–2022, which emphasise the importance of multichannel communication research.

The organisations under investigation were able to gather precise data about customers and their particular demands thanks to the use of social media platforms. Additionally, they were able to gather precise data that they could use to develop sales presentations that were focused and customer centered. By using social media, these businesses expanded their prospects for networking with possible business partners and ignited microblogging WOM about their superiority and distinctiveness. Digital and traditional sales communication strategies were combined with the strategic use of social media (for example, cold calling, face-to-face encounters at trade shows, and emails). The latter method of capitalising on new business prospects was employed less frequently because it was tied to specific instances or parts of the national sales. By mixing conventional, digital, and social media sales communication techniques, organisations appear to be attempting to increase prospect engagement during a B2B sales process's initial phase.

However, research data indicated that Brazilian companies were not yet utilising sales communication technologies to the same extent.

If there are any restrictions on using social media to find new business prospects, more investigation should be done. This border state could exist because of the culture's focus on relationships or other exogenous elements.

As companies attempt to convert interested prospects into paying customers, designers have observed that marketing operations become more focused and streamlined and that the salespeople are directly responsible for persuasion activities via traditional or digital contact channels. According to the model, because the funnel's reach is more constrained, not all business prospects convert into actual sales. To increase sales during the propaganda stage of the B2B sales process, these businesses looked to integrate traditional and digital sales communication strategies. Salespeople actively participated in the process by seeking out opportunities that were exceptional and in regions where the organisation had a sales unit.

It's interesting to note that the salespeople's choice of traditional or digital communication methods was largely influenced by the prospective clients' strategic importance and geographic location. These components act as potential boundary conditions.

When it comes to relationship management operations, organisations frequently favour in-person communication, especially when dealing with strategic clients and people with technical issues. In order to manage post-sales engagements that were viewed as transactional rather than strategic.

The example at the conclusion of the sales process (Fig. 1) demonstrates how utilising traditional sales communication tools solely during the relationship-management phase decreases the likelihood that these businesses will retain a sizable percentage of their current customers and generate a steady flow of new business opportunities. This contrasts with businesses that further integrate managing ties with current partners using social media (e.g., firms from Poland).

Similar to the previous two stages, the employment of mostly conventional sales communication combined with digital tools may be subject to a boundary constraint. Two Polish businesses made extensive use of social media in this latter stage. Poland may be used as a stand-in for a country that is technologically progressive, even though only two firms may be used to make a strong prediction that this is a national or cultural phenomenon. The researchers propose the following thesis in light of the aforementioned findings:

**Proposition 1:** Using sales communication technologies in concert with other B2B sales process stages can help companies expand their market reach in terms of distance from customers and customer relationship types.

In addition, researchers observed that utilising a variety of selling communication tools at various stages of the sales process helped the organisations function more dynamically and expedite the process. It also aided them in developing sales strategies that would take into account the specific requirements of both clients and prospects as well as the company's own organisational structure and commercial culture. Businesses may choose between various sales communications systems based on cost-saving strategies, customer acquisition and retention objectives, or client location-related variables. For instance, despite the usage of digital tools for sales communication, it was discovered that in some situations, businesses preferred to handle their pre-sales relationships by engaging critical customers in person. Given the previously provided details, researchers recommend the following theory:

2. By integrating sales communication technologies into all stages of the B2B sales process, organisations may move through the stages rapidly and adapt to the special requirements of international customers.

## **Conclusion**

The present study is a contribution to a field of study where no earlier studies have taken into account the use of social media sites during the phases of the sales procedure for businesses from various nations that are aiming for international markets. This is accomplished by incorporating literature on sales processes into the study of global business. The study highlights the adoption boundary requirements for various sales communication tools, which helps us understand how organisations gain from using these technologies during the sales process. Designers create a framework for international SMEs to use and integrate sales communication technology throughout the sales cycle. It proposes a shorter sales cycle that accounts for actual consumption.

## **Limitations and avenues for future research**

This study makes a contribution by showing how different organisations employ different sales communication strategies depending on their organisational, geographic, administrative, and economic settings. As potential boundary conditions for this model, future research could consider relational culture, technological innovation and resources, customer location and distribution, and strategic importance. It is necessary to include other economic, cultural, and firm-level factors. Even if it is outside the purview of this study, it would be intriguing to learn more about whether there is a common institutional setting or cultural background across these nations and others that contributes to comparable findings.

Researchers acknowledge that the current study has limitations because it is based on qualitative data collected from ten overseas SMEs. Understanding of how and why traditional sales communication strategies, the internet, and social media are employed in B2B sales processes was improved by the inquiry. Although quantitative statistical generalization would have aided the research, it allowed us to expand on existing findings and develop a theoretical framework.

### **Managerial Implications**

The modern sales process depends heavily on social media and digital tools. Mechanisms aimed at cutting costs and possible market expansion in both domestic and foreign markets support their adoption. These elements are now essential for the development of SMEs, which frequently face resource limitations. Social networking and other digital communication technologies appear to have had a significant impact on the B2B sales process in particular, drastically altering how salespeople approach their craft. Companies need to proactively examine which mix of sales channels will work best for their particular operations.

Digital and traditional sales communication strategies, as well as social media technology, function best together. Through such integration, firms can reach a wider spectrum of potential customers. As a result, companies should use a range of sales techniques when speaking with corporate clients.

When choosing the tools for sales communication, context-related factors should be taken into account. Digital communication technologies supported the maintenance of relationships with transactional clients throughout the post-sales activity phase, while in-person interactions aided in the retention of strategic clients. Using social media to highlight accomplishments and connections to key individuals, the company was also able to enhance its ties with customers while simultaneously expanding its profile and recruiting new business prospects. It also encourages overseas SMEs to use a variety of sales communication tactics to manage their connections with current customers. The ideal tool to employ will depend on the type of relationship you have with your customer—strategic or transactional.

Overall, it supports flexibility in sales tool selection, both within and between each phase of a B2B sales process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors have not acknowledged any conflict of interests.

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