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Winter 12-10-2002

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Why People Forward Emails to Others?

Tom M. Y. Lin

Department of Business Administration
National Taiwan University of Science and
Technology
Taipei, Taiwan
tomlin@ba.ntust.edu.tw

Heng-Hui Wu

Department of Business Administration
National Taiwan University of Science and
Technology
Taipei, Taiwan
D8808103@mail.ntust.edu.tw

Abstract

The issue of electronic mail (e-mail) communication has attracted much academic attention over the last two decades. Yet, little is known about why people forward emails to others. Through a review of the literature, this paper aims to investigate reasons why people forward emails and proposes several variables related to one's intention of doing so. More specifically, we hypothesize that the higher degree the four possible variables are (the recipient's trust in the email content, the recipient's trust in the senders, intention to staying in touch with friends, and the receivers' altruism trait), the more likely people will forward emails. On the other hand, we hypothesize that the lower degree the two possible variables are (the size of email file, and the cost of forwarding e-mail), the less likely people will forward emails.

Keywords: email communications, trust, trait, Internet marketing

1. Introduction

Nowadays, more and more people are using e-mail for their daily communications. According to a recent Nielsen/NetRatings report of 12 countries over the past five months, more than 531 million people are using Internet worldwide and email ranked first among all the Internet usage. Furthermore, a Net Value survey showed that, the popularity rate of email usage is 69.1% for Taiwanese netusers, ranked first among the four little dragons in Asia, Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore. In addition to a MCI report, email communication ranked first among all the purposes of Taiwanese's using Internet [8]. This can be attributed to e-mail's characteristics, such as simplicity, low cost, fast, convenience and so on [8] [12][14]. However, while people receive numerous emails each day, many of which are unsolicited and quickly deleted [8]. Still, many others are kept in personal files or forwarded to family, friends, colleagues, etc.

Over the past two decades, the issue of email communication has received much of researcher's attention [9][10][13]. However, not much has been done regarding e-mail forwarding behavior intention. As a result, we know very little about why people forward emails to others. Therefore, the purposes of this paper are to review literature and propose several variables influenced the intention of one's forwarding emails to others.

2. Literature review

Email is a way of communication between people or organizations via Internet system. Files or letters can be transferred between the two parties through email, on condition that each one has its own email box [9]. In other words, email enables people to communicate, to exchange data, and to increase interactions [2].

Previous research of email has been focused on issues like usage rate and purposes [9][10][13]. In recent years the track has shifted to attitude towards email usage [2]. Also, marketing impact of email has attracted much attention these days.

More and more messages are transferred through emails, as a result, it has become an important issue to investigate the reasons why people forward emails. This topic is crucial from a theory perspective as it can be of help in constructing a model for better understanding email usage behavior. From a practical viewpoint, it can assist marketers in developing advertising strategies in the web world.

Forwarding e-mail is a popular way of communication these days. According to communication theory, its effectiveness is affected by source credibility, message content and personal trait of the user [4]. This research is based on source credibility, message content and user's trait, three factors that have much influence on communication effects, and to try to explore the reason why people forward emails in more detail.

Therefore, the research will then base on the above literature reviewed to develop the following hypotheses.

3. Research Hypotheses

Extending current research, we present the following people perceptions of source credibility, the content of email, and the user's trait as major determinants of the intention to forward email to others.

3.1 The recipient's trust in the email content

Past research showed that message credibility is one of the factors influencing communication effect. That is, people are more inclined to forward a message if the message is considered to be reliable, regardless of the attribute of it [4]. In essence, forwarding email is a way of communication. The research, hence, hypothesize that the higher the content credibility the more likely that one will forward an email.

Hypothesis 1: the more the trust of the recipients in the email content, the higher the intention of forwarding emails to others;

3.2 Source credibility

Another factor believed to have impact on communication effect is source credibility. That is, one is more inclined to forward an email received from a trustworthy person [4]. Reviewing of other related literature indicated that there are three dimensions affecting the reliability of source credibility: the source being having related knowledge and experience, the feeling of sincerity of the source, and the charisma of the source itself [11]. The arguments with personal experience or viewpoints from authoritative people tend to be more reliable and convincing [11]. The research, hence, hypothesize that the higher the source credibility the more likely that one will forward an email. That is, one is more inclined to forward an email received from a trustworthy person.

Hypothesis 2: the more the trust of the recipients in the senders, the higher the intention of forwarding emails to others;

3.3 The receivers' altruism trait

A review of the literature related to communication revealed that personal trait plays an important role in message transmission [4] and the way one communicates with others [6]. For instance, one who fears of speaking in public will choose a way of communication not having to face much audience. Some researchers, therefore, argued that one's communication style could be predicted by his personal trait [6].

That is, the receivers have more altruism trait, the higher the intention of forwarding emails to others. Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

Hypothesis 3: the more the altruism the recipients have, the higher the intention of forwarding emails to others; and

3.4 Staying in touch with friends

According to social exchange theory [1], the interaction between people is in fact a mutually beneficial kind of behavior. People will engage in message exchange for rational reasons as well as for gaining some rewards. Apart from receiving some forms of external rewards, one may also get some internal benefits from message exchange, such as friendship, love and social interdependence. One can sustain his social relationship through forwarding of emails. From the angle of social exchange theory, the convenience and speed of email enable it to become a most effective way of increasing interaction and social relationship between people [5]. Evidence from some empirical research [15] showed that the main purposes for 61% of the respondents using emails at home are to keep contact with friends and relatives. Furthermore, another research found that people tend to forward emails as a way of staying in

touch with their friends [2]. Furthermore, interpersonal relationships can be built through email as well as they are in face to face to interactions [17]. The research, therefore, propose that the higher one intends to maintain a stable relationship with others the more likely that one will forward emails.

Hypothesis 4: the more intention to staying in touch with friends, the higher intention in forwarding emails to others.

3.5 The size of email file

The size of an email file will affect the speed required to transfer it. The larger the file is the longer it will take to transfer it. Hence, we proposed that the smaller the file the more likely that one will forward it to others.

Hypothesis 5: the less size of e-mail file, the higher intention in forwarding emails to others.

3.6 The cost of forwarding e-mail

Most human behavior has its root in increasing one's benefits and decreasing costs at the same time [3] [16]. Researchers of social exchange theory assumed that it is human nature to pursue benefits [1]. Hence, people will rationally assess the costs and benefits of message exchange. That is, the less cost for forwarding and emails the more likely that people will do it.

Hypothesis 6: the lower cost of forwarding e-mail, the higher intention in forwarding emails to others.

4. Conclusion and suggestions for future research

The final section draws conclusions and makes suggestions for future research on forwarding e-mail should address.

4.1 Conclusion

We hypothesize that the higher degree the four possible variables are (the recipient's trust in the email content, the recipient's trust in the senders, intention to staying in touch with friends, and the receivers' altruism trait), the more likely people will forward emails. On the other hand, we hypothesize that the lower degree the two possible variables are (the size of email file, and the cost of forwarding e-mail), the less likely people will forward emails.

4.2 Suggestions for future research

It is suggested that further research can adopt qualitative or quantitative approach to empirically test the six hypotheses proposed in this research so as to get a deeper understanding of the reasons why people forward emails to others.

In quantitative approach, a questionnaire will be developed to identify frequent email users and forwarders, and the reasons why people forward emails. In

qualitative approach, face-to-face interviews will be undertaken to ask frequent email users the reasons why they forward emails.

In sum, this study is proposed to get the hypotheses that the several variables investigated, the content of emails, the trust of the recipient's in the senders, the receivers' altruism trait, and the recipient's intention of keeping in touch with others will all positively related to the intention of forwarding emails to others.

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