

The use of social media by b2b salespeople to enhance social selling: Insights from a qualitative study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is about providing a deep understanding of how b2b salespeople use social media to develop social selling. The Task-technology fit theory (TTF) and the resource-based view provided the theoretical background for this study. A qualitative approach was used, aligned with thematic content analysis (TCA), was conducted to focus on the insights from the 10 participants interviewed, to understand their thoughts and experiences regarding the subject. Our study reveals that the effectiveness of social selling varies across different business sectors. Thus, companies should focus on developing a strategy that promote the adoption of social selling among B2B salespeople. This is why, salespeople need to be trained in how to use social media to succeed in social selling.

The study will provide valuable insights for sales and marketing managers to enable them to create common programs that can help to achieve business sales. Social selling has been developed in the context of developed countries. No research has been interested in studying social selling in the Moroccan context.

Keywords: Sales, Social selling, Social media, Business-to-business, Salespeople.

Classification:

Paper type: Empirical research

1. Introduction

There are several changes that have transformed the sales function. Previously, sales exchanges were relied on a transactional approach that was only short-term. Today, new technologies converted how salespeople conduct their sales approach (Marshall et al., 2013). Digital sales transformation helps salespeople to understand and to analyze, their customer's needs (Schneider & Kokshagina, 2021). It empowers them also to deliver a personalized solutions in order to achieve sales performance and increase customer satisfaction (Singh et al., 2019).

The introduction of social media has enhanced collaboration among sales teams by providing a platform for the information exchange, both within the team and with customers (Habel et al., 2021). They are a lot of advantages that social media can offer to salespeople, it can reduce the costs of communication with customers (Owyang et al., 2009), and it can assist them to develop a personal brand (Jacobson, 2020). Those advantages can also serve the organization because of the presence of salespeople on social networks and the quality of the content that they are publishing can improve the company's reputation (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Salespeople have no longer the option to use or not social networks. They are in the obligation to deal with it in order to bring exchanges that create value (Attia, 2019). Creating several accounts on social networks to interact with professionals is not a form of social selling. To effectively achieve sales objectives, salespeople must always be sales-oriented when they use social networks (Kusinitz, 2017).

(Minsky & Quesenberry, 2015) has shown that customers use social media to collect information and make comparisons in order to make their choice. However, despite the evident benefits, salespeople are still afraid of using new technologies. This reluctance can be one of the reasons for the failure of digitization initiatives for some companies (Altman, 2017). According to the study of (Ouazzani Touhami & Azouaoui, 2022), new technologies like artificial intelligence wouldn't replace the sales profession because it is based on human interaction that machines are unable to replicate.

The field of sales research in Morocco is still relatively underdeveloped. However, our study aims to contribute by providing an understanding of the concept of social selling and its utilization B2b salespeople use it across various sectors.

We are going to start by introducing the concept of social media, and how B2b salespeople use social media to develop social selling. To conduct our study, we will use a qualitative to provide preliminary information about the use of social selling. The results of this study will serve to understand best practices that will be used to succeed in social selling. The case of Moroccan companies is interesting because many are those who are working in sales professions and studies are almost inexistent.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social media

Social media can be defined as a platform where people share information and or sentiments with others (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media gained mainstream toward the end of the 20th, but they truly surged in popularity and become popular with the appearance of Facebook in 2007. Today, social media provide individuals with the opportunity to share their opinions regarding products and services they like (Bendahou & Berbou, 2020).

Social media marketing was born with the emergence of social networks, as brands have quickly understood the potential of these platforms in promoting their brands. (Dwivedi, et al., 2015) define social media marketing as a dialogue initiated either by customers or companies to implement promotional information that mutually benefits both parties. In our area of

interest, we aim to shed light on the social media marketing that salespeople use to promote a successful sales exchange.

They are many professional benefits that social media offers to companies, such as information sharing and support (Alalwan et al., 2017) while marketing departments take advantage of the results of successful social media campaigns sales departments often continue to rely on traditional methods.

When it came to sales departments, social media has become a great opportunity for salespeople enabling them to enhance work and expand their geographic reach to potential buyers (Gao et al., 2007). Social media offers a great opportunity for salespeople seeking to improve their personal brand (Dumont & Ots, 2020) and create content that can help build a strong professional network (Hughes & Reynolds, 2016).

Social media serves as a valuable tool in sales as it helps to generate leads identify and reach out to potential customers (Crawford, 2019). B2b salespeople need to use social media to create and manage knowledge within these networks (Ketonen-Oksi et al., 2016). Despite the fact that leads maybe not be interested in the content that salespeople are providing, they should keep publishing until they find content that helps them to become a customer.

2.2 Social selling in B2b

Social selling emerged when salespeople started using social media in their daily workflow (Moore et al., 2013). Salespeople have become aware of the importance to update their sales skills based mainly on outdated old calling methods (Newberry, 2019). Until now researchers have not accepted a universal definition of the concept (Ancillai et al., 2019).

We will introduce a definition that provides a clearer explanation of social selling : *“the strategy of including social media in the salesperson's toolbox for research, prospecting, networking, and relationship-building purposes by sharing content and answering questions” (Minsky & Quesenberry, 2015)*”. This definition highlights that social selling is a strategic approach that companies needs to adopt in order to facilitate the process of interaction with customers.

For a better understanding of social selling, we will utilize of Task-Technology Fit (TTF) theory. This theory is based on the fact of using technological tools can help a salesperson to achieve performance (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). In the context of social selling, salespeople use social media and CRM to understand networks and engage with customers for business-related purposes (Agnihotri et al., 2012).

The resource-based view theory was developed by ((Barney, 1991). This theory can also provide insights into the concept of social selling. The theory is based on transforming the company's resources into benefits. Salesforce is the ideal source for collecting customer data (Gordon et al., 1997). By using social media sales force can provide more important data because they can easily get in touch with their customers.

It is important to specify that b2b buyers often base their purchasing decisions on the personal characters of the salesperson. To excel in professional selling, every b2b salesperson must process some personal skills that enable them to communicate effectively (Spall & Schmidt, 2019) Those personnel skills empowers the B2B salesperson to craft a distinct image for their personal brand and better represent the image of the campaign.

Salespeople must continually develop new skills that to enhance their success in sales successful in sales. One of those crucial skills for achieving sales results is content creation. A salesperson can create various types of content including text, audio, or video formats (Kreutzer, 2019). Sharing content on social media can generate knowledge within a network (Lemmes et al., 2014). It is important to highlight that social selling and the role of a Community Manager are distinct from each other. The role of community Manager consists in animating social networks in order to get more interaction with the community (Attia, 2017). However, it's difficult to measure social selling (Newberry & Olafson, 2023) as customers may

utilize social media platforms to information or initiate contact with a company representative without necessarily making a purchase.

Social selling has been shown to positively impact the performance of sales teams (Rodriguez et al., 2013). Many b2b companies, including IBM, have reported revenue growth as a result of implementing social selling strategies. Social selling cannot contribute to the achievement of sales objectives unless the company provides adequate resources and support. Among those means that facilitate the use of new technologies is training (Ogilvie et al 2018).

Companies that have encouraged their sales force to be active on social media have been able to capitalize on the opportunity to engage with their professional customers. The content shared by salespeople drives engagement and creates value (Baird & Parasnis, 2011)

Salespeople in b2b need to create valuable content to develop a network of prospects and customers (Bocconcelli et al., 2017). Salespeople need monitor prospects interactions of on social media to gather information for a better adaptation in the future (Itiani et al., 2017). B2b salespeople need to maintain regular communication with their customers to nurture strong relationships (Moore et al., 2015). b2b salespeople recognize the importance of expanding their network by engaging new customers, both in person and on social media platforms. This approach allows them to build professional credibility (Ancillai et al., 2019).

The study by (Minsky & Quesenberry, 2015) explains that b2b buyers rely on social media to make the purchase decision. Consequently, a b2b salesperson has to be present when the customers are actively seeking information. By delivering content that creates value for consumers, salespeople can effectively engage with potential buyers and influence their decision-making process.

3. Methodology

Our primary focus in this research is to comprehend the ways in which salespeople use social media platforms to strengthen their social selling strategies. The answer to this question will bring a deep knowledge of the social phenomenon through interviews with experienced professionals in the sales field. Another motivating factor behind our decision to conduct a qualitative study is the scale of social selling. No quantitative studies have utilized a social selling scale.

Due to the lack of studies on social selling in Morocco, we conducted interviews with b2b professionals from various sectors of activity. The purpose of this approach is to understand the particularities within each sector, which will enable us to select a specific sector for an in-depth qualitative study and then develop our own measurement scale.

To obtain in-depth responses, we conducted semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. Two interviews were conducted face-to-face while the remaining interviews were conducted using online platforms such as WhatsApp or Google Meet. These platforms provide effective ways to conduct in-depth interviews with managers (Lo Iacono et al., 2016).

The selection of respondents was initially made based on their expertise in the field. In their study (Korstjens & Moser, 2017), several sample typologies were distinguished, and we selected the convenience sample, which involves selecting respondents based on their availability, accessibility, and ease.

The interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed into Word files to ensure accuracy (Rioufreyt, 2016). We made modifications to standardize the interviews while preserving the hesitations in the respondents' discourse, ensuring accuracy (Mayer, 1995).

During our interaction with the respondents, we began the discussion with general topics to create a comfortable atmosphere and capture their attention. Subsequently, we delved into three main themes, with the first theme centered around digital marketing and professional sales. The

second theme focused on the practices leading to the utilization of social media. Lastly, the third theme explored the programs that help develop social selling.

Furthermore, we engaged in discussions on additional themes during the interviews, although these particular topics were not included in the transcription. These omitted data points were irrelevant to our study (Rioufreyt, 2016).

To analyze the qualitative data gathered, we opted to utilize the QSR NVIVO 12 software for conducting a thematic content analysis. The thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, and present patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) The first step of our analysis consists in transcribing the interviews, then grouping all the data into a theme and assigning them a code. Following the coding process, we grouped the codes in the form of themes to validate the thematic analysis.

Table 1: Sample & interviewees

Respondents	Gender	Sales experience	Post occupied	Sector
R1	Female	8	Key Account Manager	Automotive
R2	Male	15	Business Center Manager	Banking
R3	Male	20	Sales director	Pharmaceutical
R4	Female	5	Sales director	Automotive
R5	Male	17	Key Account Manager	Service
R6	Female	10	Sales Manager	Service
R7	Female	6	Sales Manager	Agriculture
R8	Male	8	Sales Manager	Agri-food
R9	Male	16	Sales director	BTP
R10	Male	14	Project sales manager	Call center

Source: Authors

4. Results

4.1.Lack of a strategy that promotes the use of social selling

All of the respondents in our study emphasized that the success of social selling depends primarily on the guidelines provided by the organization. A salesperson cannot make the decision to publish content that promotes their sales strategy of selling without obtaining a prior approval agreement to do it. in certain fields like pharmaceutical or call centers, sales may be restricted from promoting or sharing any content related to their daily work.

Respondent 3: *“It is a strategy of the Laboratory because the drugs are an ethical product, we do not have the right to communicate the products. We do more institutional communication”*.

Respondent 10: *“Our sales team is supposed to respect an intern file, they cannot sell to prospects who are not in this file”*.

Salespeople using social media need a supportive environment for better sales success. In many companies, the decision to use social media for sales performance often originates from the salespeople themselves rather than the sales manager. Organizations can benefit from leveraging social networks, as it will allow to reduce costs and improve the efficiency of their sales teams (Schultz et al., 2012).

The answers we obtained align perfectly with the statements supported by (Ancillai et al., 2019) who consider social selling as a strategic decision. The management of the sales force can be considered a strategic activity that generates value. Companies should integrate social media as it contributes to the evolution of their sales function.

4.2. Combining Different Social Media Platforms

Mainly, Salespeople use LinkedIn for social selling purposes. The interviews (2, 4,5) reveal that the sales managers recommend using LinkedIn due to its reputation as professional social network. This means that LinkedIn can be used as a marketing intelligence tool in order to understand customer needs and adapt the offer (Woodcock et al., 2011).

Respondent 5 said: *"The smartest ones are the ones who start their day by looking at what's going on LinkedIn, on business news, on new business creation"*.

Respondent 4 indicates: *"Social selling is a way to expand their network, we always try to start with the general manager, we look to his account on Twitter, because you should know that CEOs give much importance to their image on Twitter, we also use applications like Number book or True caller, to find the contacts of our customers"*.

Respondent 2 said *"Our sales consultants can use any social network to find new customers, they can find him on Facebook or Instagram because business owners are more present on those social networks than on LinkedIn"*

Social selling is a new alternative for salespeople to engage with their customers. It offers significant advantages in terms of cost-effectiveness compared (Bocconcelli et al., 2017) to the costs and emotional charges of displacement that a salesperson had to endure to get in touch with the customer.

Customers reach out to a salesperson after gathering all the necessary information about the product. When a company prioritizes its presence on various social media platforms through marketing strategies, it is important for all employees, particularly salespeople, to align with and implement the same strategy.

4.3. Training salespeople on Social selling

Training programs aim to enhance a better use social networks in social selling. Our respondents explained that many benefits derived from such training, both professionally and personally.

Respondent 7: *"Ce cannot entrust this mission to our sales team, because they have a low level of education, we must first train them on selling skills or selling orientation, and then the digital marketing"*

Interviewee 8: *"You can't ask salespeople to bring in customers via social networks when they are using them for personal use; you have to train them to use these types of networks first"*.

In Morocco, the many sales positions do not typically require extensive formal education or specialized studies in sales. Training programs play an important role in developing the skills of sales teams. In the past, these programs have been oriented toward enhancing hard skills. In the recent times, training programs are having shifted their focus towards enhancing soft skills. In the context of new information technologies; But when it comes to new technologies of information, training programs have recognized the importance of equipping sales teams with the necessary skills to effectively use Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software.

Interviewee 8: *"In general, training is beneficial to salesperson and not to the company"*. Training is essential for salespeople to adapt to new technologies. But it can be a significant burden for organizations especially in the sales profession where salespeople frequently change sectors. This often leads companies to hesitate in investing in training for new technologies.

5. Discussion

In their studies, (Schmit et al., 2021) explain that salespeople can play a crucial role in initiating social selling practices. Those practices can push the company to implement a social selling strategy in order to achieve its goals. In the Moroccan context, the findings diverge from the

general perspective. Another study by (Agnihotri et al., 2012) shows that Social selling must align with the policies and orientations of the company. Indeed, in the Moroccan context, as in other industries such as pharmaceutical or call centers, salespeople often need to adhere to specific organizational guidelines and recommendations when it comes to publishing content on social networks.

Companies must allocate resources to build strong and long-lasting relationships (Itiani et al., 2017). To effectively utilize social media for social selling, companies need to develop a comprehensive strategy that outlines. Companies should also provide resources to support their salespeople in creating and sharing valuable content and finally celebrate the successes of salespeople who effectively use social selling to close deals.

The alignment between marketing and sales is crucial presents for understanding customers' needs and effectively meeting them. The digital sales funnel is based on the fact that salespeople and marketing departments should no longer be canvassing customers, but they should work together to provide content that will be useful to customers (Leboff, 2016). The findings of our study support the importance of a strategic vision that aligns the marketing and sales departments for effective collaboration. Without a shared strategic vision, it is challenging for these departments to work together in the medium term.

Recruiters commonly utilize LinkedIn as a platform for prospecting and searching for new talent, and it is expected that salespeople would adopt a similar approach. LinkedIn, being the leading professional network, has incorporated a sales navigator into its CRM system to enhance its value proposition in order to maintain a competitive edge.

Salespeople should use different digital tools as they provided opportunities to connect with highly qualified customers. The finding of our respondents aligns with the results of (Moore et al., 2013) which demonstrate that the combination of different social networks can promote the use of social selling. Some studies offer to provide valuable insight that can influence the effectiveness of each digital tool. For example, the studies of (Yim et al., 2022) focus on the impact of the salesperson's profile picture and the number of online reviews.

The results of our qualitative study align with the results of (Ahearne et al., 2015) which explain the significance of allocating training budgets to facilitate the use of social selling. Social selling is essentially based on sharing content on social networks (Minsky & Quesenberry, 2015). That way, Salespeople must acquire knowledge and skills in utilizing essential tools that facilitate the promotion of high-quality content on social media platforms. Salespeople should also know how to create a complete profile on social media and use it like a content creator. If salespeople are not trained to leverage the potential of technology training, they may not utilize it effectively (Ahearne et al., 2015).

Coaching is one of the best practices that sales managers use to develop proficient salespeople (Nguyen et al., 2019). To support the sales force in adopting social selling techniques, conducting coaching programs becomes crucial. These programs can encompass various elements such as one-on-one coaching sessions, providing feedback on social media posts, and conducting regular check-ins to review progress and offer additional training.

6. Theoretical and Managerial implications

Our study has opened up a new and promising avenue of research on the concept of social selling. Future studies should focus on the validation of a social selling measurement scale. Furthermore, it is crucial for future studies to explore and conduct qualitative research in various sectors of activity. This approach would provide in-depth knowledge and understanding of the specificities, challenges, and opportunities within each sector. The development of research in the field of social selling has the potential to bring about significant advancements in the training programs for sales management in Morocco.

From a managerial point of view, our study suggests that Moroccan companies should consider implementing a strategic and operational program to develop social selling.

On the strategic level, our study will help sales managers to become more aware of the importance of social media in the daily work of salespeople regardless of the company's size. The introduction of a social selling strategy will provide guidelines for achieving organizational goals and success in social selling. This strategy integration will not only benefit the sales department but also other departments, such as marketing. Social selling enables the marketing department to maintain targeted relationships with customers (Mundt, 2019).

At the operational level, it is crucial for companies to integrate training programs that focus on helping salespeople create high-quality content on social media. Effective content creation will be beneficial for the salesperson in the various stages of the sales process, starting from prospecting where quality content attracts and engages potential customers (Marshall et al., 2013).

To effectively attract customers, salespeople should consider providing content that aligns with the follow-up steps of the selling process. It is reflected in the content that salespeople should post to attract customers. Salespeople should consistently evaluate the value-creating potential of the content they publish. (Weller, 2019). Consistently creating and sharing content over time is essential for managing customer relationships and building loyalty. This involves engaging with customers by leaving comments, liking their posts, and using instant messaging to chat periodically.

7. Conclusion

This study is the first to explore the use of social media by b2b salespeople to enhance social selling in the Moroccan context. The findings of this study provide valuable insights that can serve as a guide for companies to succeed in social selling. Firstly, it is recommended to introduce a strategy that promotes social selling, considering the unique characteristics and requirements of each sector. Secondly, combining different social media platforms allows for a deeper understanding of the customers' needs. Lastly, providing training programs for salespeople will help create higher quality content on social networks.

The managers are expected to break with the traditional sales methods and integrate the new technologies into their daily work. They should also support initiatives that aim to improve the success of the sales process. We can say, that social selling presents itself as an alternative for companies that wish to use it as a way to distinguish the sales force and make it much more competitive.

However, there are some limitations to our study. We argue that the saturation point has been achieved during our interviews (Guest et al., 2006), but our sample size can be considered a limitation of our study. Further interviews with business managers from other industries would suggest new avenues of research.

Another limitation is related to the lack of possibility to interview salespeople. Taking into account the perception of salespeople may give us the opportunity to understand the constraints that push them not to publish on social media. We could not do it, because few salespeople have a strategy to publish on social media. Future research must develop a social selling scale. This can only be done through redoubling efforts in order to establish quantitative studies that will allow generalizing the results.

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