

The Role of Twitter in Business to Business Relationships

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1. Introduction

The development of social media has led to the proliferation of open platforms, shifting the dialogue to a two way conversation where; “consumers can address and learn about businesses either on their own, or through the collective knowledge of other customers” (Prahalad, et al., 2000). This has increased the interest in the use of social media for both marketing and innovation processes in a B2B context; where there is a lack of existing models and standards. Without clear frameworks for the application of social media in the innovation process, many companies have avoided or overlooked the use of social media in marketing and innovation (Martini, et al., 2013).

The current study was devised to investigate these knowledge gaps around the use of social media to create B2B relationships and source ideas. Due to its conversational character the social media platform of Twitter was used to explore how social media is being used in B2B relationships for supporting information exchange, and innovation between companies.

2. Research Methods

The structured interview questions were designed to investigate the use of Twitter in B2B relationships and were administered through face-to-face interviews. The interview questions were formulated using this combination of previous academic and industry research, scales were devised to measure the respondents use of Twitter; who the respondents followed or unfollowed, and the benefits and risks of using Twitter in B2B relationships. Finally; the respondents’ reasons for liking and retweeting of other Twitter uses content and why their own Twitter feed was liked or retweeted by their followers.

3. Results from the Interviews

The 52 interviews conducted where spread across five European countries - United Kingdom (12), Sweden (8), Germany (11), Norway (8), Finland (13). The age of the respondents ranged between 21 and 60 years of age, with 35% being between 31 and 40 years of age. Over three quarters of the respondents were male, with only 12 of the 52 respondents being female. The majority of the interviewees were involved in a marketing role (40%) and 21% being a founder, 15% chief executive officer and 11% being involved in IT related activities and 75% had worked for in their current role for five years or less. The organisations for which the interviewees worked ranged from consultancy or micro businesses employing less than 10 people to large

multinational businesses employing over 2,500 people. Of the 52 companies 75% had 100 or less employees, and 57% had 25 or less employees and these were predominantly IT related start-ups.

Predominantly the companies interviewed worked in the software and IT services industry. The industries identified by the respondents identified telecommunications, software as a service, the provision of hardware and platforms, gaming, insurance, health and education.

The survey respondents identified their main customers as service providers, such as medical insurance and retail, industrial and manufacturing, and government agencies. As expected the interviewees primarily focussed on their home country or other European countries. Approximately a third of the European respondents were focussed external to Europe, primarily the USA, and to a lesser extent Asian markets.

4. Social Media Use

When asked if the respondents had social media guidelines, 48% said they had a formal written policy, 17% had an informal policy, and 35% said they had no policy at all. The respondents were asked to describe the types of guidelines they applied when using Twitter; common responses included being conversational, informative, quality content and the use of common sense when posting information.

Apart from the use of Twitter, LinkedIn (87%), Facebook (81%), Blogs (79%) and YouTube (62%) were the dominant social media platforms used. The interviewees also mentioned a number of regionally focussed platforms such as Weebo, Xing (Germany), VK (Russia), and messaging applications such as Snap Chat, WhatsApp and Wee Chat.

Table 1: Other online platforms/channels do you use besides Twitter?

Platform	Percentage
LinkedIn	87%
Facebook	81%
Blog	79%
YouTube	62%
Instagram	42%
Foursquare	10%
Podcasts	6%
Tumblr	6%

The researchers hypothesised that the use of Twitter for private purpose and business purposes would be distinctly separated. However, it was found that the majority of respondents often used private accounts for business purposes. The respondents were asked the length of time they had been on Twitter for private versus business purposes. From the responses, there seems to be little difference in private and business use, with the majority commencing their use of Twitter for private and business purposes approximately the same time.

It was found that while 85% of the respondents checked their account daily, only 42% interacted by favouring, retweeting or direct messaging on a daily basis. The response was similar for the creation of new tweets with 46% of the respondents tweeting daily. Prior to conducting the research, it was suggested that there might be external factors that influenced the regularity that the respondents used Twitter. It was found that activities such as marketing campaigns, trade shows and events lead to an increase in Twitter activity. While the majority of the respondents were tweeting on behalf of their organisation, current affairs and topics of interest to the general community were also incorporated into their business focussed feed.

One of the main focuses of the research was to investigate the kind of activities that companies (involved in B2B relationships) use Twitter. A list of 23 activities was compiled and the respondents were asked to indicate the regularity of their use of Twitter for these activities. The six activities, for which the respondents used Twitter on a daily basis, are contained in Table 2.

Table 2: Regularity of Twitter use by Purpose

Purpose for Using of Twitter	Use daily or 2-3 times a week
Monitoring industry trends	55.8%
Monitoring others in your network	53.8%
Information distribution to the network	53.8%
Distributing information about your company	36.5%
Emerging trends and technologies	44.2%
Distributing information relevant to the industry	42.3%

Interviewees were asked about their experience with using Twitter, predominantly those interviewed were comfortable and well supported in their use of Twitter and it played a role in their daily business activities. Prior to the research it was hypothesised that Twitter was used as a means of recruiting customers; however, the results show that Twitter is primarily as a communication and information gathering tool.

As part of the interview the respondents were asked about their experience of using Twitter and 92% agreed that “using Twitter enhances your credibility”, and 75% agreed that using Twitter makes it easier to gather information. When asked about the possible benefits of Twitter 90% of the respondents considered Twitter to be a “Quick way to distribute information” and 65% agreed that it was beneficial for “gathering business intelligence”. Additional comments also included “creating a community - our company started with a tweet to the world”, “crowd sourced way of finding interesting stuff”, and “Identifying trends, what's next” which is important within the B2B business environment (Simula, et al., 2013).

Interestingly, the respondents did not feel that they had to use Twitter to compete. While the respondents were regular users of Twitter, only 9 respondents strongly agreed with the statement “many of the people in my company use Twitter”.

Table 2 below, shows the level of respondent agreement with the Twitter experience statements provided.

When asked about the characteristics they considered when deciding to follow someone on Twitter, the respondents' indicated the highest level of agreement with the six items highlighted in Table 3. Being knowledgeable and influential were also considered to be important characteristics. A number of respondents talked about additional factors in their decision to follow someone and these included "level of innovative thought", "new inspiration and ideas" and "learning from others", and "reciprocation of interests". This focus on knowledge and quality information supports the previous research of the likes of Howard & Hussain (2011), Khondker (2011), Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira (2012) and Sapsed & Tschang (2014).

Table 3: Characteristics Important in the Decision to Follow

How important are the following in your decision to follow someone on Twitter	Mean
Their level of authenticity	5.86
Quality of Information they share	5.84
Their relevance to your business	5.67
Their expert knowledge	5.33
Their level of integrity	5.29
Their level of influence in my industry	4.92

When asked if they had ever unfollowed someone on Twitter, 20% of the respondents answered no. This could be due to the interviewees being "*really picky about who I follow*". When asked for the criteria which were important with unfollowing someone on Twitter; irrelevant Tweets, the trustworthiness of the Tweeter, and the overwhelming volume of their Tweets, were the main reasons to unfollow someone. When asked for other reasons not contained in the survey list, characteristics such as poor communication style, ie. negativity or abusiveness, inappropriate Tweet content or the account being fake.

Table 4: Reason to unfollow someone

Unfollowing Behaviour	Mean
Tweets are no longer relevant	4.83
I did not trust them anymore	4.12
Too many tweets	3.63
Tweet too often	3.59
Did not read their tweets	3.17
They are not part of my industry anymore	2.90
They were using information I shared to contact my clients	2.73
No long doing business with them	2.29
I no longer wanted to work with them	2.29
They were competing with me	1.58

Interviewees were asked about the use of analytics to manage their accounts, with 52% of the respondents evaluating their Twitter contacts either once a month (31%), or once every three months (21%). When asked how often they used the analytics

provided by Twitter 21% responded irregularly, and 26% either daily or a few times a week. Interestingly 13% never checked their analytics. The respondents considered mentions and engagement as the top two metrics of their Twitter use, see Table 5. the respondents used a range of software to evaluate their Twitter account including Hootsuite, Tweet Deck, Sprout Social and Buffer.

Table 5: How important do you consider the following metrics?

Twitter Metrics	Mean
Mentions	5.59
Engagement	5.24
Number of followers	4.94
Engagement rate	4.76
Impressions	4.33
Tweet impression	4.24
Audience insights	3.88
Profile visits	3.76
Number of tweets	3.56

The respondents were asked to rate possible benefits of Twitter and this highlighted the importance of information distribution and also exchange (see Table 6). Other benefits that were rated highly were, in line with the commitment-trust theory of Morgan & Hunt (1994), building trust and linking or collaborating with others in the industry. Prior to the research it was supposed that the respondents would use Twitter to develop and maintain relationships with customers, suppliers and mentors. However, from the survey responses, this is not the case.

Table 6: Importance of the benefits of Twitter

Rating of the possible benefits of Twitter	Mean
Builds your company's brand	6.06
Quick way to distribute information	6.04
Builds trust with others	5.87
Put you at the "Top of mind" for your customers	5.56
Linking to others in the industry	5.54
Gathering business intelligence	5.02

While the respondents found it easy to identify the benefits of using Twitter very few saw any drawbacks or risks. The interviewees were supplied with nine possible risks or drawbacks of which the possibility of their account being hacked was the most important to them (see Table 7 below).

Table 7: Possible Risks or Drawbacks of Twitter?

Rate the possible risks or drawbacks	Mean
Your Twitter account being hacked	3.58
Loss of control of the conversation	3.42
Leaking of personal information into a public sphere	3.13
Ongoing demands of being on Twitter	2.87
A fake account being set up in my name	2.87
Leaking of intellectual property	2.77
Business opportunities loss to competitors	2.58
Monitoring of my activity by competitors	2.35
The blurring of the lines between my work and private life	2.35

When asked to identify other possible risks the respondents cited issues such as *“Tweets being taken out of context”*, the negative action of others towards them, such as Trolling, Bad publicity and *“digital fatigue personally”*.

5. Tweeting Behaviour

To further investigate the perceptions of the value of being on Twitter the respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions about their Twitter accounts and tweeting behaviour. In response to the question *“which of your tweets have been highly favoured or re-tweeted by your network?”* answers centred around the words information (informed informative, informing, informational) and interesting (interest, interested, interesting, interests). In response to *“Why do you think your tweets were highly favoured?”* time (time, timely, times, timing) interesting (interest, interested, interesting) and information (information, informational, informative) were the most common responses. There was also a cluster of responses around event, current and new. This would indicate the respondents considered that themes of their own Tweets focussing on interesting information that was current, was well regarded by their network. In relation to the respondents retweeting and favouring of Tweets from their feeds; they were more likely to interact with Tweets that contained news, events, and up to date information.

Further analysis was undertaken on these open-ended responses using the Correlated Topic Modelling Method (CTMM) (Blei & Lafferty, 2007). This produced five topics, in relation to the respondents tweeting and favouring behaviour. These topics are displayed in Figure 1 words such as engage, help, support, and favour appeared to be linked in the topics. The concept of reciprocity, although not stated specifically was implied by a number of the interviewees.

The CTMM was also applied to questions concerning the respondents Twitter marketing strategy. Of the five topics derived the themes of return on investment, engagement, community and network were highlighted. A number of the respondents struggle to articulate clear measures for return on investment and strategic direction for the use of Twitter as a marketing channel. Despite this, all of the respondents considered Twitter as a valuable channel for community building, information gathering/distribution and marketing. Topic Two in Figure 1 below

illustrates the discussion around the measurement of the return on investment for the use of Twitter. Topic 3 focuses on marketing strategy and the use of Twitter to build engaged communities of followers. Topic 4 contains words around the content, information and quality that are measures of the success for the use of Twitter.

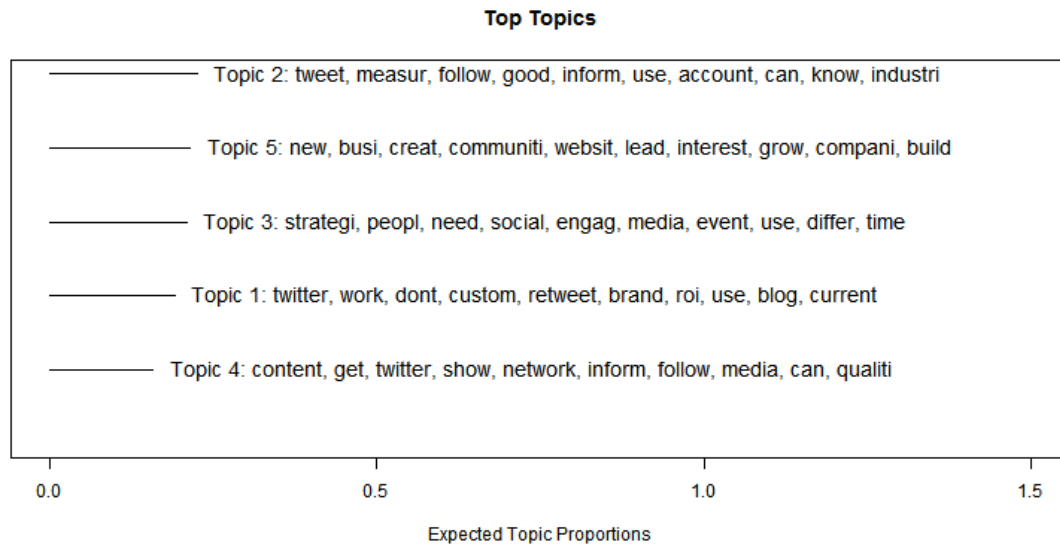


Figure 1: Five Top Topics for Twitter Strategy and ROI

As highlighted by the analysis much of the respondents' Tweeting behaviours are around reciprocating and helping others in their network in the hope that they would do the same for their Tweets as illustrated in topic 1 in Figure 2. According to topic 4 timeliness and newness of information was also valued by the respondents and others in their network.

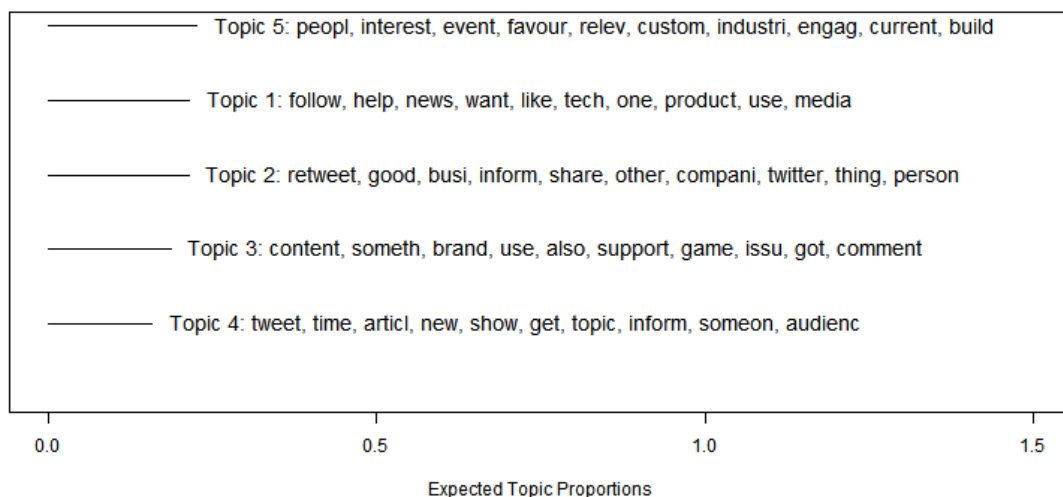


Figure 2: Five Top Topics relating to Twitting Behaviour

This use of Twitter as a source of credible knowledge, information and innovative ideas is consistent with the previous research of authors such as Boyd & Ellison (2007), Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) Kietzmann, et al., (2011). The instantaneousness of the Twitter feed as conduit for awareness and information exchange supports the

findings of Taylor (2011), Curry (2012), Morse (2012), Sapsed & Tschang (2014) and Park, et al., (2015).

Future strategies for the use of Twitter discussed by the interviewees included the creation of separate handles for different customer groups integration of Twitter into the larger marketing campaign, the implementation of metrics for the return on investment, and the adoption of management software.

6. Managerial Implications

The research illustrated how Twitter could be used to build business relationships through the exchange of high quality, relevant and current information. Twitter was not primarily used for recruiting clients, but as a means of supporting and enhancing business relationships. The research found that the conversational and egalitarian nature of Twitter enabled interviewees to use it as a channel for customer and peer conversations that supported the development of product and service innovations.

The respondents felt that Twitter should not be used as a direct marketing channel for products and services, instead for informing and engaging customers and peers in their network on wider topics. Particularly successful was the use of Twitter for promoting events, recognition of others in the network, and for building the brand of individuals and companies. The research identifies that Twitter is used more extensively by particular industries such as those around the Internet of Things and software development. The number of followers is not necessarily a measure of the success of a company's Twitter account, as small well-connected communities were considered to be more effective by the interviewees.

Innovation is central to competitive advantage, and this research on social media channels such as Twitter, have a role to play in the development and support of innovation (Chesbrough & Appleyard, 2007; Lee, et. al, 2010). This study shows that Twitter can be used as a source of information, ideas and innovation (Antikainen, et al., 2010; Flores, et al., 2015; Singh, et. al, 2008; Standing & Kiniti, 2011). The immediate nature of the information exchange on the Twitter feed enables collaboration in real time between companies and their suppliers, customers and peers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Edosomwan, et al., 2011). The importance of peer-to-peer discussion or communications, and access to experts and thought leaders was evident from the interviews conducted (Leonardi, et al., 2013). Although Twitter was used for the exchange of new, up-to-date and interesting information, very few of the companies interviewed had any formal framework for the measurement of the return on investment for their use of Twitter. They considered it to be "worthwhile and important to be there", but lacked clearly defined objectives for their participation and on-going development of their participation on Twitter (Martini, et al., 2013).

7. Further Research

Globalisation, increased competition and the rise of peer-to-peer business models such as Airbnb continues place pressure on companies and economies to innovative. It would seem that the rise of phenomenon such as start-ups, crowdsourcing

platforms and open source innovation will continue to stimulate the use of social media in the innovation process. In response to this, it is proposed to extend the research using modified scales developed during the interview process; and to administer them in the form of an international online survey to test the validity of the measures proposed in this research. The researchers will also plan to further investigate the use, and role of Twitter in the innovation process using a model developed from the exploratory interviews and machine based text-mining tools.

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