

**UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SALESPERSON CUSTOMER  
RELATIONSHIP PERFORMANCE: A SOCIAL CAPITAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract**

The unprecedented growth in use of social media has impacted every aspect of business. Sales and marketing operations have been most affected due to the high level of customer involvement. However, there is no clear understanding of the role played by social media in salesperson customer relationship performance. This article attempts to theoretically outline the role for social media in salesperson customer relationship performance. Specifically, taking a social capital perspective, the article develops a framework proposing the positive influence of social media use on salesperson social capital leading to salesperson customer relationship performance.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SALESPERSON CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP PERFORMANCE: A SOCIAL CAPITAL PERSPECTIVE**

Buyers' immense interest in social media has made it essential for sales organizations to understand and evaluate the potential impacts of utilizing social media in the selling process.

Witnessing the trend, IBM recently launched a new product line called *Smart Commerce* to help partners leverage social media to enhance revenues. This social commerce line is projected to generate up to \$10 billion in sales by 2015 (Spiegel 2011). In another example, 50 % of salespeople in a global survey perceive an increasing role for social media in the buying process (OgilvyOne global survey, [www.B2Bonline.com](http://www.B2Bonline.com)).

Despite the widespread adoption of social media by customers, companies have been cautious in embracing social media. Most major social media initiatives have emanated from marketing departments seeking to build brand identity and generate conversations around new product launches, event sponsorship, product usage etc. For instance, Ford used social media to bring together a group of potential buyers that bid for driving its Focus prior to its launch and provide feedback. Coke used social media to highlight its support for summer Olympics while Nike strengthened its brand image using their presence in social media. The rich array of recent moves by marketers appears to focus exclusively on marketing initiatives that aimed at enhancing the brand experience for consumers and provided empowered them through engaging conversations (Gupta, Armstrong and Clayton 2011). Sales transactions are consummated through traditional or online channels and this marketing approach does not require significant adoption of social media by the company's sales force.

By comparison, the industrial selling process consisting of a sales representative taking the lead to build customer relationships does not appear to have changed much. However, there

are distinct signs that the use of social media has led to subtle variations in the B2B domain, particularly in enhancing salesperson's efforts to develop and maintain lasting customer relationships. Although scholars have looked at sales force adoption and use of other technology based tools such as CRM (Ahearne, Jones, Rapp, and Mathieu 2008; Hunter and Perreault 2007), the interplay between social connections and commerce in a fast paced technology environment makes the study of social media use by sales people an important and interesting topic.

As in the case of B2C marketing, social media is used in the industrial selling process to generate leads through traditional networks of referrals. In some companies, social media is used to generate conversations and engage prospects creating 'followers' who may then become leads (Gupta 2011). Next, these leads are qualified through a filtering process, which consists of using social media to obtain information about traditional criteria such as role in the organization, marketing lead source, current or previous suppliers, and so on. These qualified leads are then fed to the traditional sales force network for follow up. However, once a lead is handed over to the sales force, it is unclear as to how sales people might successfully deploy social media in the sales process.

This highlights an important managerial issue for a sales organization: How can social media be strategically used to enhance salesperson performance? We focus on this research question in this paper, and seek to understand the underlying mechanism that makes social media useful to salespeople. Specifically, given that 'social commerce' is an interplay between investments in social networks and returns through online commerce (Stephen and Toubia 2010; Tedeschi 2006), we break fresh ground through systematic inquiry into salesperson use of social media. We examine this issue through the theoretical lens of social capital theory that

encompasses both social network connections and the potential returns such connections offer to individuals and firms.

In the following sections, first, we discuss the available social media tools and their usefulness for salespeople. Specifically, given that social media aims to mimic the ‘human touch’ that shapes and maintains buyer-seller relationships, we direct our initial inquiry into this topic to explore the link between social media and *customer relationship performance* (Jayachandran et al. 2005). To address this issue, we propose that salesperson’s social media use will contribute to his /her social capital leading to customer relationship performance.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

There are a number of social media platforms and tools available for salespeople. However, it is important to ensure that social media tools are selected so as to complement the strategic objectives of the sales organization. Social media tools must be compatible with sales force technology needs. Since salespeople operate as ‘boundary spanners’ and ‘relationship managers’ (Bagozzi 2006; Weitz and Bradford 1999), social media tools should support salespeople in carrying out these functions.

Some of the relevant social media tools for salespeople include Blogs, Social Networks, Twitter, and E-Communities/Discussion Forums. Specifically, a blog is a website in a format of an online journal that can be developed and maintained by an individual salesperson or a group of sales reps. Also, blogs are useful for expressing opinions, educating audiences, initiating discussions related to brands, products, or services. In order to succeed in its purpose, a blog should be updated consistently. In terms of topics and contents, blogs should be relevant to target audience and written in conversational style so that readers are motivated to participate.

To develop a social network, salespeople should be active in different social networking websites such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn. These social networking platforms allow salespeople to connect with friends, prospects, and influencers and to engage in networks and communities. For example, LinkedIn, which is very popular among professionals, enables individuals to obtain recommendations that can be an efficient and effective way for salespeople to bolster their credentials. Social networks should enable salespeople to receive referrals and introductions to prospects through friends and connections. In another example, salespeople can conduct a live Q&A session on their Facebook page with their customers and prospects.

Some of the microblogging and social networking services are very useful to put out news/posts for quick interaction with customers. For example, Twitter, the most popular microblogging and social networking website allows salespeople to follow potential customers, and to know what people are trending. The social search platforms (e.g., ReSearch.ly) can be used as twitter search engines and they can help salespeople to filter out conversations and influencers that are relevant to their businesses. Such technology tools can really make a salesperson's job easy by offering ways to filter results on the basis of demographics (e.g., gender, location) and psychographics (e.g., sentiments). Interestingly, ReSearch.ly, a social search engine contains features such as Degrees of Separation that can outline the 'connections path' between a salesperson's brand and the market champions.

Salespeople can also make use of different e-communities and discussion forums operating online to discover strengths and weaknesses of product offerings. E-Communities offer platforms for customers to review, praise, and criticize products. Participation in such communities would allow salespeople to read and comment on customer reviews, dismiss rumors, and tackle competitive claims. With the help of social media tools, salespeople can

conduct live chat sessions or webinars to provide additional value through interactions. Industrial salespeople who are dealing with buying centers can conduct online meetings with all members of the buying center at the same time from distant location with tools such as GoToMeeting.com. Webinars tools such as Linqto provide an easy opportunity to have one-to-many or many-to-many engagement solutions.

### **SOCIAL CAPITAL**

Drawing on studies that sought to highlight how members of social communities invested in long term relationships with cohabitants in order to insure their own survival (Jacobs 1961), the term ‘social capital’ encompassed ‘embeddedness’ of individuals within a community with attendant benefits that accrued through strong interpersonal relationships based on trust, cooperation and collective action (Nehapiet and Ghoshal 1998). The notion of ‘capital’ in ‘social capital’ is akin to the classical theory of capital where capital is essentially treated as a surplus value that represented an investment with expected returns (Lin 1999). Thus, social capital alluded to the investment an individual made in interpersonal ties with a view to benefiting from it at a later date. Since interpersonal ties are central to social exchange in a variety of situations, the social capital concept has been used to expand our understanding in diverse areas such as family ties (Coleman 1988), public life representing citizens’ interaction among themselves and other civic institutions (Putnam 1995) and even national economies (Fukuyama 1995). More recently, firms have been conceptualized as social communities whose purpose is to create and share knowledge (Kogut and Zander 1996). This has contributed to the belief that firms having superior social capital enjoyed greater organizational advantage (Nehapiet and Ghoshal 1998; Moran and Ghoshal 1999).

In contrasting human capital advantage that espouses that more talented individuals do better, Burt (2000) argued that social capital was the contextual complement to human capital and proposed the social capital metaphor as “that the people who do better are somehow better connected.” Furthermore, several scholars have addressed the underlying mechanisms through which individuals and firms accrued and deploy social capital. While Bourdieu (1986) viewed social capital as the sum of resources that accrue to the individual or the network based on network connections, Coleman (1990) provided a functional approach to social capital based on social network structure associated with the individual and what they could expect to achieve by occupying that position in the network. In deploying this social capital individuals gained better credentials (Bourdieu 1986: 249), better job and promotional prospects (Lin and Dumin 1986).

Individual attained such benefits either through mutual obligations and membership rights that was guaranteed by network membership (Bourdieu 1986) or simply through connections that the network provided (Granovetter 1973). Thus social capital has been presented both as ones network structure and the potential resources it brought. For the purpose of this research, we adopt a broader definition of social capital, in line with Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998) which is as follows: Social capital is the sum of actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit.

In the following section, we particularly focus on salesperson social capital. Notable, we discuss three different dimensions of social capital and develop propositions linking social media use to these dimensions.

## FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

There has also been extensive research in marketing using social network perspective although none has explicitly focused on the benefits of social capital. In a recent study of the role of social hubs on new product adoption process, Goldenberg et al. (2009) conclude that people with extensive social connections, referred to as 'social hubs' played a key role in early adoption of new products as they got to know about it ahead of the others. Further, they concluded that this was purely due to network connections since 'followers' with no apparent propensity to be innovators also contributed to expanded adoption merely by being 'social hubs'. Applying a social networking perspective to 'social commerce networks' Stephen and Toubia (2010) conclude, among other things, that the sellers who have their access to markets enhanced by electronic networks, not essentially who occupy a central position, benefit more. This perhaps alludes to a strategic role for social media as we seek to develop a framework to understand the nature of relationship among salespersons' social capital and their strategic media use.

In the context of our exploration of salesperson's strategic use of social media, it is essential to further expand on dimensions of social capital. Towards this end we briefly review research that has viewed salesperson as part of social networks. Although, anecdotally sales persons always prided in their ability to network with different significant individuals that helped them perform better in their jobs (Steward et al. 2010) scholarly attention into this dimension of sales force is rather recent. In one of the earliest studies, Ronchetto et al. (1989) used social capital to understand influence patterns in organizational buying systems. Later, Bristor (1992) used social network perspective to study sales force's role in influencing B2B buyers. In more recent years scholars have also attributed social capital indicated by the sales person's network position and the quality of interactions they had with other members of the organizational

network to the sales force's ability to coordinate their internal resources effectively to deliver value to customers (Steward et. al. 2010; Boles etc. 2011 ). In another study that linked salesperson's social network position to desired outcomes, Seevers et al. (2007) demonstrated how social network relations influence their ethical behaviors.

Thus, existing research into salesperson's social network ties, though limited, have taken into account both the structural position and the quality of interaction of the sales force within their organizational networks. Plouffe et al. (2004), while applying social network theories to the personal selling field argued that members of organizational network tended to develop a shared meaning of focal concepts (e.g. CRM). We use this argument to extend the benefits of social capital to include common perspectives that members of a social network may possess, thereby adding a cognitive dimension to social capital. In integrating these individual aspects of social capital, we adopt the following dimensions proposed by Nahapiert and Ghosahal (1998):

### **Structural Dimension**

This dimension describes whether an actor is connected or not connected to another actor in a network. Further, in perceiving such connections as a whole in the form of network, this structural dimension deals with descriptive characteristics of the network that allude to how dense the network is and how extensively connections exist among actors. Pertinent to this dimension is the notion of 'structural hole' that deal with the social capital that accrued to actors by virtue of their being a unique connection between unconnected actors or groups; and the notion of social capital arising out of 'closure' that indicated a closely knit group (Burt 1992). Key to this dimension is also the recognition that networks created for one purpose may or may not be deployed for another purpose (Coleman 1988). For instance, usefulness of an individual's

extensive network of friends to sell financial products and services will be limited by the extent to which the individual and members of the network of friends consider it appropriate to use those connections to sell such products.

Based on our discussion of social media tools and their usefulness for salespeople, it is pragmatic to believe that social media tools will provide motivation to and enhance ability of salesperson to conduct interactions with customers to maintain his/her social structure.

Therefore, we propose:

*P1: Salesperson's social media use will have a positive link with the structural dimension of salesperson social capital.*

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Insert Figure 1

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### **Relational Dimension**

When actors have connections and they interact repeatedly they form bonds based on trust, reciprocity and affect. These, naturally, may vary from actor to actor based on the history of interactions among actors (Granovetter 1992). Such connections bind the members of the network together through a common identity and relational norms (Coleman 1990; Burt 1992). Further, some members could extend their network reach through other actors with whom they share a strong bond. For instance, a salesperson who is close to a buyer may hope to increase his reach to other potential buyers when the existing buyer either moves to a new organization or agrees to provide a referral with recommendation.

Relational dimension's contribution to social capital stems from the expectation and obligations members have towards one another based on personal and emotional attachment (Coleman 1990). Consequently, individuals fulfill their social motives through the emotional support that the network offers by way of respect, friendship and prestige. For instance, many salespeople understand this relational aspect of their customer interactions and build capital by creating opportunities such as sharing market information with the customers, providing support to customers' offerings through writing blogs, online discussions, and endorsing products on social media platforms. Such actions from salesperson side would lead to friendship and closeness. In short, social media use will help salespeople to conduct interactions to build and maintain trust and trustworthiness. Therefore, we propose:

*P2: Salesperson's social media use will have a positive link with the relational dimension of salesperson social capital.*

### **Cognitive Dimension**

Nehapeit and Ghoshal (1998) refer to 'cognitive dimension' as the capital that the network members can access through the resources provided by "the shared representations, interpretations, and systems of meaning among parties." For a salesperson, this cognitive dimension may be crucial in the context of contents that they seek to create in addressing the needs of a specific segment. For instance, a salesperson of pharmaceutical products tasked with selling to physicians, may find that his medical qualification, should he have one, helps him access some of the social capital resources through the perceptions that the physicians may have about the sales person's ability to meaningfully interpret their needs.

Salespeople with higher tenure, stronger connections may hope to impact their extent of shared cognition with the help of social media even when being part of their customer networks. For instance, a salesperson for CRM systems could become a strong influence in an online marketing community and enhance his social capital by being perceived as someone who is 'on the same page' because of repeated and unbiased answering of customer queries on CRM. In other words, by using social media strategically, salespeople will be better able to conduct interactions with customers and other channel partners focused toward vision sharing. Thus, we propose that:

*P3: Salesperson's social media use will have a positive link with the cognitive dimension of salesperson social capital.*

In presenting the above, we recognize that, although these have been discussed as unique dimensions in order to appreciate their individual contribution to the salesperson's social capital, they are related to one another. It is not difficult to conceive that repeated connection through social ties may lead to enhanced closeness between actors. Also, social capital, when taken to extreme may point to a very close network of connected actors who may be closed to new ideas or not open in their dealings (Janis 1982), a discussion of social capital in the context of a medium like social media that is often faulted for extreme openness, perhaps doesn't warrant a detailed section on the demerits of social capital in professional sales.

### **Customer Relationship Performance**

Salesperson's customer relationship performance captures the salesperson's success in achieving customer satisfaction and retaining current customers. Jayachandran and colleagues (2005) used this construct at the organizational level defining the success for CRM technology. For the

current research, we adapted it at the salesperson level. Several recent studies consider customer related outcomes such as customer satisfaction and service quality as a measure for salesperson's performance (Hunter and Perreault 2007; Rapp et al. 2006). For example, studies have included relationship-building performance as a key aspect of salesperson performance (Hunter and Perreault 2007). For the current study, we include customer relationship performance that consists of outcomes such as customer retention and satisfaction (Jayachandran et al. 2005). This approach is parallel with the recent sales research that encourages using more behavior-based performance outcomes in relational selling context (Ahearne et al., 2007; Hunter and Perreault, 2007).

Dyadic communication, one of the critical components of selling, is very much conditioned by social environment (Kale and Barnes 1992). Notably, salesperson's social capital can be used as resource to generate stronger personal bonds within buyer-seller relationships. These bonds can perpetuate trust and commitment in the relationship and eventually convert into business profits for both sides (Pillai and Sharma 2003). For instance, the buyer's commitment to a business relationship can facilitate greater levels of retention. Also, salespeople's social capital will enhance their customer-need knowledge given their strong social connections in the marketplace. With this understanding of a customer's needs, the potential for customer satisfaction to be realized is heightened (Homburg et al. 2009). Therefore,

*P4: Salesperson's social capital (i.e., structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions) will positively influence on salesperson customer relationship performance.*

## DISCUSSION

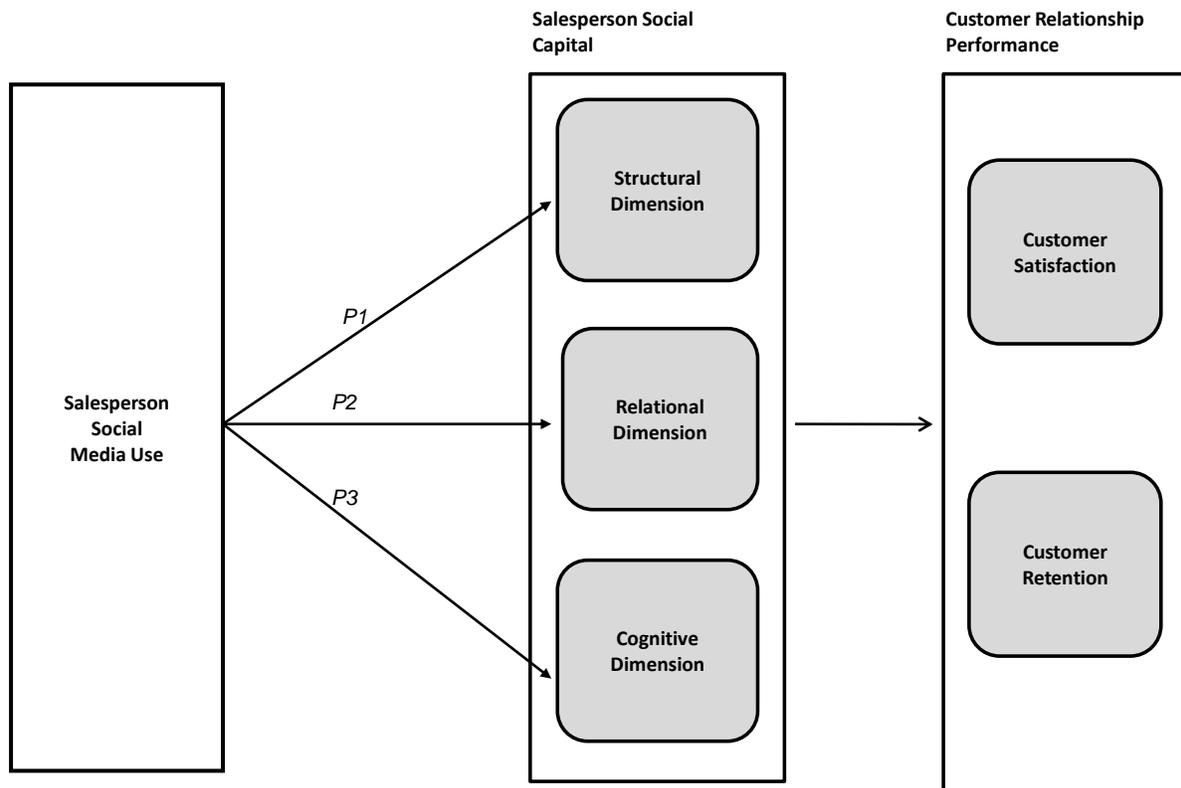
The importance of social capital in buyer-seller relationships has been underscored (Tuli et. al 2007). Organizations that possess strong connections with their customers are better able to gain customer knowledge through such customer interactions resulting in to competitive advantage for the organization (Yli-Renko et. al 2001). Opinion leaders whose position was determined by how well they were socially connected often determined the speed with which their peers adopted new products (Nair et. al. 2010). People with highest number of social connection, referred to as ‘social hubs’, have been found not only to adopt new products earlier than other but also to influence the size of the market for new products (Goldenberg et. al. 2009). Underlying all these findings is the intuition that socially connected individuals and firms derived some key advantages from those connections that translated into important professional benefits. Therefore, salespeople are witnessing the emergence of ‘social selling’ where selling is turning into a social enterprise needing allies in the ubiquitous social media to channel customers to their cause.

Sales people, who have been considered as eyes and ears of the organization that they represented, were perhaps well positioned to use such social connections to create value (Bristor 1992). Strategic use of social media by salespeople will involve exploring and exploiting informal and direct *social links* (e.g., prospects, customers, market influencers, colleagues from same/different departments, superiors, etc.) to enhance customer value creation. Social links provided sales people, among other things, privileged access to uncovering customer needs early and obtain referrals on the customer side and, from the intraorganizational side, better coordinate internal value creating functions to deliver value in customer relationships (Plouffe and Barclay 2007 ; Tuli et. al. 2007). Being central to the buyer-seller network helped sales people to

develop cooperative relationships with their buyers that were characterized by better information exchange, trust, reciprocity, reduced conflict etc. (Bristor 1992).

Social media creates 'extensive opportunities' for organizations to engage customers (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010) and through active customer engagement, social capital for a salesperson can be generated. Social media provide customers with tools to and interact with firms and thus, social media tools can help salespeople build social networks and develop knowledge bases. Therefore, on the event of social media empowered business environment, the focus and goal of a sales organization's social media strategy should be to build salesperson social capital so as to enhance salesperson customer relationship performance.

**Figure 1: A Framework for Salesperson's Social Media Use**



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