

Influence models in B2B online communities

Abstract:

Social media marketing plays a significant role in B2C context. However, the B2B marketing research emerge as a relevant field in the marketing area, because the new opportunities that social media and online communities offer to companies. This new way of interacting rises a recent literature in marketing research. Drawing on the contributions on influence phenomena in B2B online communities, our work aims at presenting and commenting the leading existing models. This study focuses on the major two models, considered as founding and complementary to each other: we will specifically highlight their convergences and differences. Then we propose a new model of influence in B2B online communities.

Key Words:

Social media marketing, B2B, online communities, influence, social influence

1. Introduction

Companies invest more and more money and spend time in social media, to spread messages and content for influencing others members of the communities. If there is a large part of research in this field in B2C and C2C marketing, very few research had been driven in B2B sector. 91% of B2B decisions-making participate already in social-media and 69% use social technologies for cultivating long-term business exchanges (Ramos and Young 2009). The social media marketing has played a significant role in the past years mainly in B2C. This new way of interacting rises a recent literature in marketing research, studying online communities, where consumers are emboldened to make decisions about products and brands (Kozinets, 2002). One of the main innovation provided is the capacity of spreading messages and influence to others consumers through the e-WOM (Katona et al., 2011). We aim to address the raising importance of trust issues in B2B relationships (Lilien, 2016) by investigating its role in online B2B communities. Important difference exists in the use of social media in B2B and B2C (Jussila et al., 2014).

2. Research Question:

With the rise of the social media, new ways of interacting impacted the companies. Many researched in marketing studied the role of influencers and opinion leaders in online communities, but very few research concerned the B2B sector while there are significant differences between B2C, C2C and B2B sector. The scope of this article is to understand how influence occurs in B2B sector and to present a new model in the B2B online communities. Our model is based on different conceptual frameworks on the existent state of art.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Social media in B2B sector

The impact of information access on buying decisions is quite well understood in B2C field, but the application in B2B sector is still evolving (Wiersema, 2013), the use of the social media and other networking which is well developed in B2C field, is also emerging in the B2B interactions. The engagement practices are changing with the growth of the use of social media which influences buying behaviors but it is difficult to monitor their influence.

Social media marketing is a field of research well advanced specially focused on the consumer in the B2C sector, but there is a lack in the B2B sector (Michaelidou, Siamagka, Christodoulides, 2011). Evidence had been shown by scholars about the importance of social media in B2B companies (Shih, 2009; Safko, 2010; Wollan and Smith, 2010; Barlow and Thomas, 2011; Hinchcliff and Kim, 2012), and was compared to B2C organizations (Michaelidou et al, 2011). The literature review can propose that social media approach in B2B sector is quite different from B2C companies (Lehtimäki et al, 2009; Gillin et Schwartzman, 2011; Geehan, 2011), but it was also shown that it is more difficult to use social media in B2B sector because of the major differences in the B2B products and markets. Indeed, markets, products development and products are significantly different between B2B and B2C sector (Holt, Geschka et Petralongo, 1984; Kotler, 1996; Urban, Hauser, 1993; Webster, 1995). Products produced by B2B sector are generally more complex and take more time, and the most significant is that the customers are most of time large organizations instead of single persons who can decide by themselves (B2C). In the B2B sector there are generally quite few consumers instead of in the B2C sector, and the co-operation is more intense. One of the most important characteristic is that the professional buyers considers a large number of different criteria in the buying decision and tend to acquire the most possible information's about products and evaluate objectively the alternatives before taking a decision. In the same vein, legal contracts and IPR issues can become challenges in the free disclosure of product or business ideas in inter-organizational innovation collaboration (Nordlund, Lempiala, Holopainen, 2011). However, it should be noted that the B2B sector is not homogeneous. In particular, it is important to note that there is a significant difference between small and medium-sized enterprises and large groups. *Online communities in a B2B context*

The framework draws on recent marketing studies of brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), social identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), group-based consumers interactions (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004), and the community influence. In contrast to other identities, where the persons are unique, the identity is collective (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn, 1995; Tajfel and Turner, 1985). Several studies suggest that social identity can be defined as a brand community that involves both cognitive and affective components (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). A brand community is a "(...) specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on the structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center a brand good or service." (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412) and have three principal components: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz&O'Guinn, 2001). The phenomenon exists also in the B2B context, where people are involved in the decision-making process and companies work in a complex environment of different actors. (Andersen, 2005; Mäläska, Saraniemi, and Tähtinen, 2011).

The B2B companies use the potential of interaction between two customers (C2C) in B2B brand communities to generate value. B2B online communities are useful as a platform for exchanging technical and brand-related knowledge, ideas, information, experiences and solutions between business partners (Snow, Fjeldstad, Lettl, and Miles, 2011). A member of a community can receive functional and social benefits (Dholakia, Blazevic, Wiertz, and Algesheimer, 2009). The relationships in B2B communities are built through the interaction behavior of the members who make contributions by posting text content (e.g., knowledge, information, experiences, problem presentation and solutions). In a community customers interact with the brand, the product, the company, other consumers, and with the whole community. (Libai et al, 2010). These interactions are the core of the brand communities (McAlexander et al. 2002). The interactions between customers in B2B brand communities

occurs in a social system which are based on a social consensus (Deighton and Grayson, 1995) with guidelines on user behavior, which define the way of how to behave in the community. Implicit values are not written but are part of the general interaction in B2B brand communities (Burnett and Bonnici, 2003) and are most of the time managed by moderators who have to control the posts and the behavior of the members; this is particularly relevant in B2B context. Interaction is fundamental in a brand community (McWilliam, 2000) “the more communication and interaction, the stronger the community”, this is based on the social exchange theory and the idea of a collaborative competence (Lusch, Vargo, and O’Brien, 2007). The members of a B2B brand community can contribute with experiences, information’s, knowledge and social skills to these co-creation processes, but on the other hand it is risky undertaking to exchange information’s, ideas and problem solutions in online community (Porter and Donthu, 2008). Trust can be perceived as a subjective norm in order to uncertainty and increase the quality of the interactions in the community.

3.2 Influence models

The social influence has been studied since long time, different theories explore this phenomenon. This topic of research has been particularly explored in the field of marketing since 1960. Social influence occurs when a person adapts his or her behavior, attitudes or belief of others in the social system (Lenders, 2002). Scholar research on social influence, opinion leader, source credibility, diffusion of innovation had demonstrated that consumers influence other consumers (Phelps et al., 2004). Influence is principally based on information about other people (Robbins, Garry, Pattinson, and Elliott, 2001).

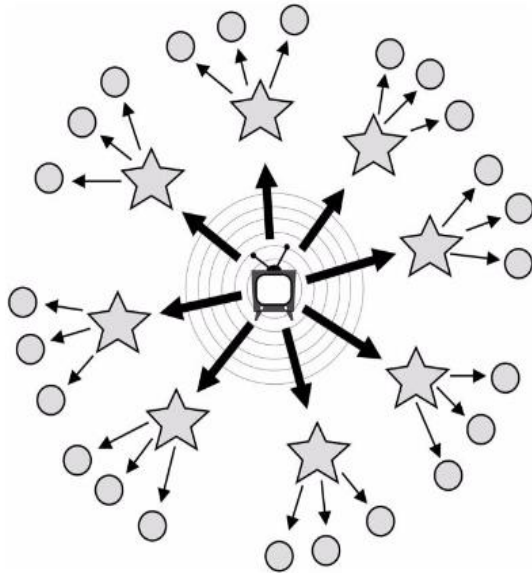
In an online community information is shared by individuals in form of digital content. Online communities have been a field of marketing quite well explored these past years. Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004) studied the degree level of participation of the members in a virtual community based on the group norms and the social identity. Kozinets (2002) proposed a new approach of studying online communities collecting and interpreting data from consumer’s discussions in online forums. Godes and Mayzlin (2004), Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) studied the effect of the Electronic Word of Mouth communications. In social systems, persons who have a large number of ties to other people are considered as influential. A large number of authors emphasize the positive “influential” role played by some individuals. Such people are called also opinion leaders, mavens or hubs. Van den Bulte and Wuyts, (2007) introduced a model using two adopter segment: influentials, who in turn affect another segment of imitators, and imitators themselves, whose own adoptions do not affect influentials. These two segment structure with asymmetric influence was used in several studies in sociology and diffusion research (Goldenberg, Libai and Muller 2002; Lehmann and Esteban-Bravo, 2006), and for Goldenberg (2009) influentials are considered as experts with persuasion skills and many social networks connections.

Due to the characteristics of social media, based on consumer to consumer dialog, it is difficult for brand managers to directly shape the conversation; however, they have the opportunity to impact it through intermediaries. This intermediary role fits with the two-step flow of communication theory (Roshwalb, Katz, Lazarsfeld, 1956). Selection of intermediaries is related to criteria about which they will be chosen for leveraging the brands’ engagement by practitioners.

Our research focus on the major two models, considered as founding and complementary to each other: the models of Watts and Dodds (2007) and the model of Goldenberg (2009). In the 1940s and 1950s, Paul Lazarsfeld, Elihu Katz and colleagues (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1968) formulated a revolutionary theory of public opinion formation which proposed that individuals may be influenced more by exposure to each other

than to the media. According to their theory, illustrated schematically in the figure 1, only a few of individuals which are “opinion leaders” (stars) act as intermediary between mass media and the majority of the people in the society (circles).

Figure 1 : schematic of the two step flow model of influence



The information and influence “flows” through opinion leaders to their respective followers, the authors called this theory the “two step flow” of communication, in contrast with the one-step theory where individuals are like atomized objects of media-influence (Bineham, 1958).

With the introduction of the two step- flow theory, the idea that opinion leaders or “influentials” (Merton, 1968) are the core of a social network occupied a central place in the literature of the diffusion of innovations (Coleman, Katz and Menzel, 1966, Rogers 1995; Valente 1995), marketing (Chan and Misra, 1990; Coulter, Feick and Price, 2002; Myers and Robertson 1972; Van den Bulte and Yoshi 2007, Vernet 2004). Katz and Lazarsfeld defined opinion leaders as “the individuals who were likely to influence other persons in their immediate environment,” this definition is still available (Grewal, Mehta, and Kardes 2000, 236).

There are many definitions of “influential”: Coleman et al. (1957) and Merton (1968) proposed that there are individuals who directly influence more than three or four of their peers, instead the recent study of Burson-Masteller (2001), suggested that they must influence more than 14. Keller and Berry (2003) instead, define influentials as scoring in the top 10% of an opinion leadership test, and Coulter et al. (2002) as a top of 32%.

Watts and Dodds (2007) studied the impact of the “cascades” which influence people in a network, this phenomenon depends from the activation of the people in a network, it measures the impact of the activation, who generates new activations and so on (Watts, 2002). They proposed two types of cascades, the “local” which affect a small number of individuals and terminate in one or two steps of the initiator. The “global” cascade which can affect many individuals, propagate for many steps and are ultimately constraint only by the size of the population through which they are passing. They suggested that global cascades can occurs when there is a critical mass of early adopters, which are individuals who adopt after a single

adopting neighbor and a critical mass can be defined when sufficiently many early adopters are connected to each other that their subnetwork “percolates” the entire influence network (Watts, 2002). This critical mass may affect only a small portion of the total population. Moore (1999) suggested that the critical mass is what enable a new idea or product to “cross the chasm” from innovation to become a success. In their research, Watts and Dodds (2007) noted that the ability of any individual to trigger a cascade depends much more of the global structure than on his or her personal degree, so if the network enable global cascades, anyone can start one, and if the network does not permit, no-one can start one. It means that neither influential nor non-influential would be able to do so. But, when large cascades do occur, influentials do trigger larger cascades than individuals (circles). Van den Bulte and Yoshi (2007) called this phenomenon the “multiple effect of influentials”. They suggested that the impact of the influentials is not so important, and even, if their impact is a simply more effective than average. Another result of their study pointed that the influentials tend to belong to influentials groups; thus, they interact preferably with other influential people, who are generally more difficult to influence, as Newmann (2002) called the phenomenon of “assortativity”. Watts and Dodds (2007) pointed that highly influentials individuals are susceptible to influence themselves, if the networks become more connected, cascades become larger and more frequent, but influentials tend to trigger marginally larger cascades than average individuals, their relative impact remain limited. The importance of cascades are not based on few individuals influencing others easy-to influence people, but rather on an account of a critical mass of easily influenced individuals influencing others easy to influence (as shown in Figure 2).

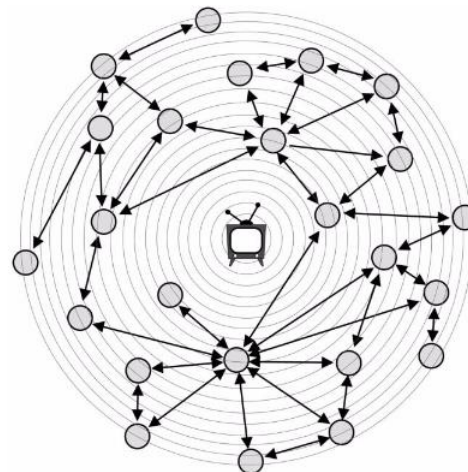


Figure 2 : Schematic network of influence

The model explored by Goldenberg et al. (2009) considers that influential people have three important traits: (1) They are convincing / charismatic, (2) they know a lot (i.e., are experts), and (3) they have a large number of social ties (i.e., they know a lot of people).

They focused their study on this last characteristic and explored the importance of the hubs in the influence phenomenon. In contrast with Watts and Dodds (2007), Goldenberg and al. (2009), argued that social hubs adopt sooner than other people not because they are innovative, but because they are exposed earlier to an innovation as a result of their multiple links. In their work they suggested that a social network is a set of actors and the relationships (ties) among them. Thus, a person’s importance can be inferred from his or her location in the network (Iacobucci, 1996).

Weimann (1991) suggested that influence is a combination of three personal and social factors: (1) the personification of certain values, (2) competence, (3) strategic social location.

These traits make them particular, and expose them to many different opportunities. Goldenberg et al. (2009) focused their study on this principal characteristic, and evaluate the role of the hubs in the diffusion progress. As they pointed, hubs are essential in the infection process (Goldenberg et al. 2005).

However, there is a tension with the theory of Watts & Dodds (2007) who showed that cascades of influence may instead be driven by “a critical mass of easily influenced individuals”.

4. Theoretical model

If there is an important literature on this topic in B2C and C2C marketing research, quite few researches concerned the B2B marketing, in spite of Wiersema (2013) research agenda in the B2B which shape the need of specific insights. Increasing brand awareness is important stake for B2B online communities (Wang et al., 2016), therefore social influence is essential for high quality user generated content (Homburg et al., 2010). To enhance brand awareness through online communities firms are collaborating with influencers (Wang et al., 2016). Schultz et al. (2012) and Agnihotri et al. (2016) suggested that the impact of salesperson social behaviors on social media activities would be a useful topic for further research. Seller’s behavior influence buyer-seller relationships and performance, there is a serious lack of research exploring the field of online communities in B2B context (Katona and Sarvary, 2014; Roser and al., 2013).

The use of social media in B2B sector raises severe information security risks, although if there are a lot of particularities in the B2B sector, there are also common characteristics for instance as the aspects of sense of community or self-esteem that had already been studied in the marketing research. We are interested here in focusing our research on this influential people in the B2B online communities.

The model that we will propose in our research is based on the model of “cascades” of Watts and Dodds (2007) applied in B2B online communities. Everyone in a B2B online communities can have a potential of influence in his personal network, which can aggregate members of different companies. We are interested in exploring the capacity of each determinants of a company in the potential of influence. We want to test if each “cascade” is linked to the position in a network regarding to different characteristics of the company and to examine each one. Then, we propose to test the influence of meta datas on everyone and measure the potential of each determinants to produce or to allows the cascades. We will be able to measure the number of cascades, and the capacity of influence in their network, then to optimize the numbers of cascades in a B2B context. The decisive factors that we can evaluate are for instance the company page on social media, the links to other companies, Metadata of the company trough multivariate regression analysis the influence. The determinants that we can evaluate are for instance the sales performance, the activity domain of the company, the number of the employees of the company, the market share, the links and the relations to others companies, the engagement to the community (employee/unemployed/supplier/subcontractors...), the number of the members in the online community, the characteristics of the social identity of the community, the main characteristics of the brand community, the actions of the page company (nb of sharing of the posts of the company, number of likes, etc.). As we have seen previously, the B2B sector is not homogenous, it will be important in our research to clearly define the application framework in this sector according to different segments that will have been pre-tested and validated. The methodology that we can apply on this model is the multiple linear regressions.

5. Discussion

Andersen (2005), proposed that B2B brand communities are instrument for relationship building and pointed the importance of B2B brand communities in proving a platform for customer to supplier as well as C2C interactions. He suggested also that further research should analyze the factors that influence community building. The influence model that we propose here is especially well appropriate for studying the influence phenomenon in B2B online community, it takes in charge all the specificities that B2B context require.

However, an important point that we have not seen addressed in is the question of the loss of influence, it is for this reason that we will focus our further research on this question, attempting to identify the various components of the influence in B2B and the reason of their potential reconsideration.

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