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Timothy Cawsey Jennifer Rowley

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Social media brand building strategies in B2B companies.

Introduction

Social media, including social network sites, have become important digital meeting places for friends and acquaintances and are now viewed as significant communication arenas (Harrigan, 2011). Social media support a range of social activities, including blogging, micro-blogging, photo-sharing, social networking, and videosharing (Centeno *et al.*, 2009). They offer two-way communications, the opportunity for individuals and businesses to capitalise on people's networks, and a rich digital space for the exchange of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011). In late 2014, there were 1.35 billion Facebook users, 284 million Twitter users, 1 billion Youtube users, and 332 million LinkedIn users (www.statista.com). Accordingly, businesses and their marketers are increasingly viewing social media as an additional marketing channel through which they can communicate or interact with their customers and prospective customers (Gummerus *et al.*, 2011; Stelzner, 2013). Evidence of successful brand presence in social media (Edelman, 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), the size of the potential audience, plus the level of interactivity available in social media channels, drives business interest in social media. Particularly, for business-to-consumer (B2C) firms, research shows that social media have changed the tools and strategies that companies use to communicate, promote their brand and create brand communities (Christodoulides, 2009; Kaplan and Haelein, 2010; Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Even more significantly, there is increasing recognition that in the open source branding context of social media, brand owners must relinquish control, and develop approaches that negotiate the tensions associated with the co-creation of the brand, with concomitant consequences for accepted branding truths and theories (Christodoulides, 2009; Fournier and Avery, 2011). Consistent with this there have been various calls for further research into the

commercial use of social network sites, to contribute towards the development of a theoretical foundation for marketing and brand building in this arena (Beer, 2008; Fuchs, 2009; Gensler *et al.*, 2013; Gummerus *et al.*, 2011; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010; Kim and Ko, 2012; Laroche *et al.*, 2013; Rokka *et al.*, 2014).

The main focus of research into the business use of social media is the causal relationships associated with individuals' behaviour; the knowledge base regarding the use of social media in organisational settings needs further development (Ngai *et al.*, 2015). In particular, there is an absence of studies on social media strategy, even in the B2C context, where research mainly consists of studies focussing on specific aspects of strategy, such as employees and reputation management (Rokka *et al.*, 2014), the drivers, activities and benefits associated with social media (Tsimonis and Dimitradis, 2014), or practitioner case studies on one organisation such as Finnair (Jarvenpaa and Tuuainen, 2013). Research on social media strategy has been even more limited in the B2B context. Here there are only two significant studies, both of which are based on surveys that generate descriptive profiles of B2B companies engagement with social media (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011; Jussila *et al.*, 2014). Two other studies offer some useful, but limited, insights on the basis of content analysis of, respectively, the social media presences of ten large B2B technology businesses (Brennan and Croft, 2012) and company tweets (Swani *et al.*, 2014). Yet, there is a pressing need for greater understanding of the potential of social media in B2B contexts, to support businesses in overcoming their hesitancy regarding social media adoption (Jussila *et al.*, 2014; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011; Swani *et al.*, 2014). For B2B businesses, social media can be used both internally and externally to enhance communication within the organisation and with customers and suppliers, build relationships and trust, deliver sales support, understand customer needs, engage in learning and collaboration, create and cultivate leads, and to drive

innovation (Altshuler and Tarnovskaya, 2010; Jussila *et al.*, 2014; Shih, 2009). In addition, since B2C and B2B companies differ in the nature of their customer base, and their approaches to branding, communication, and relationship building, knowledge and practice developed in the B2C context can not be assumed to be transferable to B2B organisations (Swani *et al.*, 2014).

Hence, this study seeks to address the gap in knowledge regarding the use of social media in the B2B sector by undertaking a qualitative, interview-based study with marketing managers, based in a range of countries and service sectors. The aim of the study is to generate transferable insights into company attitudes, actions and strategies concerning the use of social media to promote their brand in B2B contexts. More specifically, its objectives are to:

1. Explore the adoption of social media for branding and marketing purposes by companies in B2B marketplaces
2. Identify B2B companies' social media branding objectives
3. Explore the use of social media metrics and measurement
4. Propose a taxonomy of B2B companies' engagement with social media
5. Generate insights into the components of a B2B social media strategy
6. Propose a framework of the components of a B2B social media strategy.

The next section of this article provides a review of previous research on B2B and social media, B2B markets and brand-building, and B2C and social media. The qualitative methodology for the research is outlined next, including research instrument design, profile of participants, and data analysis. Next, findings are reported and discussed with reference to previous literature. The final section summarises the research outcomes and contribution, and offers recommendations for researchers and practitioners.

1. Literature Review

2.1 B2B and social media

Research on social media use and strategies in B2B contexts is confined to two key studies. Michaelidou *et al.* (2011) conducted a small-scale quantitative study of social media marketing practices amongst B2B SME's; they profile practices in relation to the usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing. Whilst useful, this study is marred by its relatively low response rate, with only 27 of their respondents being users of SNS. Jussila *et al.* (2014) conducted a survey of social media use in B2B Finnish technology firms, reporting on the platforms used, functions, and barriers against social media use; they examined the use of social tools both with partners and in the customer interface. Two other studies also offer some useful insights. Brennan and Croft (2012) undertook a content analysis of the social media presence of ten large B2B technology businesses, and reported on the platforms used and application areas, and noted considerable variation in the levels of social media engagement amongst the sample businesses. Swani *et al.* (2014) undertook a content analysis of company tweets, and offers insights into aspects of social media communication strategy, such as message appeals, selling strategy approach, information search, and time effects. However, none of these studies have undertaken a qualitative study of the kind that might inform theory-building, which, given the limited knowledge base regarding social media strategy, in general, and B2B social media strategy more specifically, should be a priority.

2.2 B2B markets and brand-building

In B2B markets there are generally fewer, but larger customers and long-term business relationships, involving co-operation and even collaborative innovation are central to organisational success. In addition, purchases are often preceded by an extended decision process by professionals with high levels of product and sector knowledge. Traditionally this led to a dedicated sales force taking precedent over branding (Kotler and Keller, 2006). However, brand building has become increasingly important for B2B companies, especially for those companies in worldwide, commoditised technology markets where the brand is a signifier for trust (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006). A better brand reputation has been found to give the buyer a greater feeling of assurance of the product quality, which leads to a greater willingness to pay a price premium (Bendixen *et al.*, 2004), and confidence that suppliers will stay the course of a long customer relationship (Glynn, 2012). As B2B companies increase their investment in brand building activities (Ohnemus, 2009), they are engaging more proactively in building their online brand presence. Managing their presence in the digital space is particularly important for B2B brands since two-way interaction with a brand represents the key asset and indicator of success, and is a critical issue for the brands' survival. Furthermore, trust is particularly important in the digital arena (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005; Li *et al.*, 2011), and arguably, one of the primary roles of brands in the digital space is to build trust, so that customers in remote locations can be comfortable and confident in their use of the organisations' services and products.

2.3 B2C and social media

Whilst there is a paucity of research on the use of social media by B2B companies, there is a growing body of research associated with the B2C social media context. Much of this research focuses on consumer behaviour in social media contexts, and in other virtual communities, and affirms the significant role that social media can play in influencing brand

reputation and equity, and consumer opinions, attitudes and activities (Ngai *et al.*, 2015). It recognises both the advantages and disadvantages of the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that is facilitated by social media (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Bruhn *et al.* (2012) showed that both traditional communications and social media communications have a significant impact on brand equity. Other studies have examined specific aspects of consumer behaviour, offering some insights into how organisations might respond. For example, Van Noort and Willemsen (2011) investigated complaint management, or online damage control, through consumer-generated and brand-generated platforms. De Vries *et al.* (2012) examined the popularity or acceptability of brand posts on brand fan pages, including the effect of positioning, vividness and interactivity, and Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) explore the consumer's role in brand performances and storytelling in social media. Culnan *et al.* (2010) emphasise the importance of community building in the implementation of social media, and other researchers have investigated aspects of this topic. For example, Habibi *et al.* (2014) identify five unique dimensions of social media brand communities, whilst Laroche *et al.* (2013) suggest that social media brand communities can impact on brand trust and loyalty. However, even in the B2C context research into organisational strategies for social media is dominated by consultancy-based studies, sometimes based on extensive data gathering, but with very limited reporting in the public arena (e.g. Edelman, 2010; Jarvenpaa and Tuunainen, 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011), and practitioner texts offering advice on social media strategies (e.g. Safko, 2010; Shih, 2009; Smith and Zook, 2011; Sterne, 2010). One exception is Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) who explore the brand strategies in social media of the companies with significant Facebook presences in Greece through an interview based study. They identify external and internal drivers of social media engagement, activities, and expected outcomes (such as engagement, e-WOM, brand awareness, brand loyalty, and sales). Others include McCarthy *et al.* (2014) which explores the dilemma facing

UK football clubs in the formulation of their social media strategy, and their concerns regarding their control of the brand presence and image. Wilson *et al.* (2011) specifically propose four types of social media strategies: the predictive practitioner, where social media use is confined to a specific business area; the creative experimenter, where small scale social media tests are conducted to test ways to improve discrete functions and practices; the social media champion, where large, often cross functional initiatives are designed for predictable results; and, the social media transformer, which involves large-scale interactions that extend to external stakeholders, and improve the way in which the company does business. In a rather different vein, Gensler *et al.* (2013) propose three strategic options for brand management in social media: following the path of least resistance by listening carefully and responding to consumer demands; playing the consumers' game by trying to gain cultural resonance through demonstrating a deep understanding of the online cultural environment in which their brand operates and fitting in seamlessly; and, attempting to leverage social media's connectedness and get consumers to play the brand's game by creating branded artifacts, social rituals, and cultural icons for consumers to appropriate and use on behalf of the brand.

Two specific aspects of social media management have attracted significant interest in B2C contexts: open source branding, and social media evaluation. Social media provide users with the wherewithal to post comments on brands; they can challenge the brand reputation and contest the brand identity (Fournier and Avery, 2011; McCarthy *et al.*, 2014; McLean and Wainwright, 2009; Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014) such that brand owners have no option but to accede some stake in the brand to their customers (Christodoulides, 2009), and shifting the balance of power in relation to the brand from the organisation to the consumer (Bernoff and Li, 2008; Fisher and Smith, 2011). Fournier and Avery (2011) refer to this as open source

branding, suggesting that: ‘*open source branding takes place when a brand is embedded in a cultural conversation such that consumers gain an equal, if not greater, say than marketers in what the brand looks like and how it behaves*’ (p.194). Accordingly, Christodoulides (2009), suggests that post-internet branding is about facilitating conversations around the brand, and the co-creation of meaning.

Measurement and evaluation of impact is widely recognised to be problematic in online marketing (Krall, 2011; Peck, 2011; Tollinen *et al.*, 2012), and this has fuelled considerable interest in social media objectives and measurement metrics and their alignment. Michaelidou *et al.* (2011) identify four key objectives for B2B social media activities: attract new customers, cultivate relationships, increase brand awareness and communicate the brand online. Brand awareness and brand image and presence are widely proposed as the core objectives of B2C companies’ social media activities (Jansen *et al.*, 2009; Smith and Zook, 2011) and various studies have investigated the impact of social media on brand equity creation (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Goh *et al.*, 2013; Luo *et al.*, 2013). Others have explored the ROI of social media marketing (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010; Kumar and Mirchandani, 2012). Central to evaluation are metrics. Social media analytics are distinct from web marketing analytics and there has been considerable discussion as to the most useful metrics and their alignment with marketing objectives. There have been a number of useful contributions that have generated clusters of metrics and embedded them in dashboards (Bosomworth, 2010; Cvijikj *et al.*, 2012; Marklein and Paine 2013; Pauwels *et al.*, 2009), but there has been little research into the use of metrics or dashboards in specific organisations.

2. Methodology

Social media marketing is a relatively new activity for B2B companies and therefore qualitative research that seeks to generate deeper insights into practice, attitudes and views has the potential to make a useful contribution. Accordingly, this research adopts an interpretivist stance that is inductive in nature, in order to understand and develop rich descriptions of how the interviewees act within their environment (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Saunders *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, according to Bell (2010), a qualitative approach sheds light on people's perceptions of the subject, and has been recommended as particularly appropriate for gathering data from professionals, such as marketing communications practitioners (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). More specifically, in-depth semi-structured interviews were used because they can show what is happening and lead to new insights (Saunders *et al.*, 2009).

An interview schedule was developed with the following four sections: social media activities; brand and social media objectives; social media and brand awareness; and, reporting on social media success. Between five and eight sub-questions or prompts were identified in each section, to be used selectively by the interviewer depending on the interviewee's responses. The interview questions were informed by the practitioner researcher's knowledge of social media implementation, coupled with reading of a wide range of practitioner and academic articles. The interview schedule was piloted with four practitioners and two other researchers, and revised accordingly. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face (4), by telephone (9) or through e-mail (1). Respecting interviewees' time constraints, interviews were kept to a maximum of 50 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participation in the study was voluntary and interviewees were informed that interviews and any reports were confidential; interviewees were free to decline to answer any questions or to withdraw from the interview.

Fourteen interviews were conducted with social media practitioners in communication or marketing roles in B2B companies. One of the researchers is a digital marketer, and has a network of LinkedIn professional contacts working as social media practitioners in a variety of different sectors and countries. Key informants were selected on the basis of their ability to comment on social media strategy in B2B marketing. Participants were deliberately chosen from companies in the telecommunications, financial services and IT industries across the UK USA, Ireland and France. This selection of three sectors is consistent with the approach adopted by Rokka *et al.* (2014), who based their study of reputation management in social media on interviews in the banking, consultancy and food sectors. The industries chosen for this study were selected because businesses in these service sectors tend to be large global players, and are significant players in the B2B economy. Typically, they have large B2B contracts, and are proactive in maintaining relationships with their customers, often through a direct sales force. Since B2B relationship building and maintenance are key, they are particularly likely to be interested in technologies that offer opportunities in this area. The number of participants is consistent with that used in other qualitative research that requires informants from business backgrounds (e.g. Veloutsou and Taylor, 2012; Wallace and De Chernatony, 2007). The profile of the interviewees is shown in Table 1.

Interview transcripts were reviewed, summary notes made and thematic analysis conducted, according to the guidelines offered by Miles and Huberman (1994). Analysis was guided, but not constrained by, the themes in the interview schedule. An inductive approach to coding was employed for the thematic analysis in order to avoid “*rigidity and premature closure that are risks of a deductive approach*” (Lapadat, 2009, p. 926). In accordance with the advice of

Strauss and Corbin (1990), the analysis commenced with coding data line by line. Next, significant codes were raised to themes and used to support first open coding or exploration of the data, and then synthesis and making connections through axial coding, prior to finalising the surfacing of meaning from the data through selective coding.

Table 1: Interviewee profile

Company	Job Title	Location	Industry	Company Activity
C1	Digital Marketing Executive	UK	Financial Services	Private Equity
C2	Marketing Manager	Ireland	IT	ERP Software
C3	VP Digital Marketing	UK	Financial Services	Asset Management
C4	Director, Corporate Communications	UK	Financial Services	Derivatives
C5	Ebusiness Marketing Consultant	UK	Financial Services	Asset Management
C6	Director, Web, Digital & Social Media	France	Telecoms	Mobile Telecoms
C7	Customer Marketing Manager	UK	IT	Business Analytics Software
C8	Social Media Manager	USA	Telecoms	Business Telecoms Provider
C9	Director, Social Media Audience Marketing	USA	IT	Business Analytics Software
C10	Product Marketing	USA	IT	Software for Human Resources
C11	Head of Online	UK	Food Services	Corporate & Event Catering
C12	New Business Consultant	France	Consultancy	Communications & Advertising Agency
C13	Client Services Director	UK	Consultancy	B2B Marketing Agency
C14	Director & CTO	UK	Consultancy	PR & Social Media Agency

3. Results and discussion

4.1 Social media adoption and use

All participants reported that they were engaged in social media marketing. Many described how it had started as a standalone activity but had now been integrated into their wider marketing strategy. Indeed, there was a high level of management interest in the business's social media marketing strategy, with most of the companies being required to report to management on activities and outcomes. As one interviewee said: *"I send a weekly report to the CMO which is presented to the board of investors. They're really interested in who's talking about us and what's being said"* (C8). Company 3 was not currently reporting on activities because their social media initiatives were still in the planning stage. Like many of the other companies, one of the main drivers for the development of a social media strategy was to keep up with the competition, and specifically to protect their brand: *"It got to the point where management felt they needed to act because of the risk to the brand, as the market leader, by not going social"* (C3). C12 also saw the primary benefit of a social media strategy as building brand image: *"The first objective is the image of the agency and secondly it is to help recruitment; we try to have a good image so we can recruit the best talent"*. There was also a general agreement that expenditure on social media marketing would continue to grow. C1, in particular, commented on the movement of expenditure from advertising in favour of owned and earned media and anticipated that social budgets would be 10-20% in the near future compared with 5-10% currently. C14 suggested that: *"I think there was a huge gold rush in 2010-11 similar to 10-15 years ago when everyone had to have a web site"*.

The high level of engagement with social media in this group is in stark contrast with findings from Michaelidou *et al.* (2011)'s study of the use of social media marketing in SME's in which only 27% of the sample used SNS, and of these only half were investing any financial resources into SNS, and with Jussila *et al.* (2014)'s findings that even the sector

with the highest level of engagement in their study only achieved 21% for use of social media in the customer interface. On the other hand, Jussila *et al.* (2014) did find a higher level of use of social media for internal communication.

4.2 Social media objectives

Marketing theory is agreed that marketing communications objectives need to be linked to overall company goals (Chaffey *et al.*, 2009, Fill, 2009; Smith and Zook, 2011). Whilst most companies agreed, some had difficulties in doing this in a structured way. For example, C3 suggested a very formal approach: *“It’s derived from the business objectives then marketing objectives then digital objectives and then our social objectives, so there’s a hierarchy to our goals”*, whereas, C12 admitted: *“We don’t have very precise objectives or metrics because we’re not quite sure what we want to measure”*.

Table 2: Social media objectives

Objective	Number of companies citing objective
Enhance brand image/reputation	10
Extend brand awareness	8
Facilitate customer engagement	8
Deliver customer support	6
Generate leads	5
Manage reputation	3

Nevertheless, most interviewees were able to discuss specific objectives for their social media initiatives. Table 2 indicates the number of companies mentioning each objective.

Table 2 shows that both brand image/reputation and brand awareness are key objectives for social media programmes. Previous commentators have made the observation that social media is useful for raising brand awareness (Li, 2011; Smith and Zook, 2011), and there is some empirical evidence that B2B companies use social media to increase awareness of their

brand, or to communicate their brand online (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011; Jussila *et al.*, 2014) and to manage their reputation (McCarthy *et al.*, 2014; Rokka *et al.*, 2014). This is consistent with the significance of image and reputation for B2B companies (Bendixen *et al.*, 2004; Glynn, 2012; Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006).

The three other groups of objectives mentioned by interviewees all centred on relationships with customers. Previous research suggests that the internet and associated technologies can be used to build relationships in a B2B context (Bauer *et al.*, 2002; Sharma, 2002), and amongst B2B SME's, Michaelidou *et al.* (2011) report that attracting new customers and cultivating customer relationships are the most important social media objectives. Social media supports two-way communication, making the feedback loop easier and faster than with traditional market research (Smith and Zook, 2011). Several of the companies identified enhanced customer engagement, more effective customer support, and lead generation as objectives of social media strategies. Social media were seen as an opportunity to converse directly with consumers and influencers. For example, C2 suggested: "*we follow a lot of our customers on Twitter and try and engage with them there*". Social media were also seen to be well suited for support and customer service, especially for companies selling technical products such as telecommunications: "*We're working to synchronise social media with customer service as we get a significant amount of support questions through these channels*" (C8). Social media also provide an opportunity for customers to share knowledge among themselves; C10 used LinkedIn for its product user groups. Finally, lead generation was mentioned by a few interviewees as a further objective for social media.

4.3 Social media marketing metrics and evaluation

Businesses look for evidence of return on their investment in social media marketing, and for alignment between the outcomes of social media marketing and wider marketing and business objectives. However, since social media marketing is relatively new, metrics are still under development as far as many of the companies in this study are concerned. This is reflected in the following comment from C14: *“Most of our clients come to us for help with their strategy and KPIs as they don't know what success looks like. We recommend a level of implementation over 3-6 months to fix a benchmark before fixing metrics”*. In keeping with this advice, C3 spent several months auditing their online reach and getting management buy-in for their social media programme before fixing objectives, which are around brand image and support for product campaigns. Chaffey *et al.* (2009) support this strategy of exploration and benchmarking before fixing objectives and metrics.

Some companies were relatively advanced in their engagement with metrics, but others were hindered in their development of metrics by the absence of clear objectives and/or senior management buy-in: *“Social media is seen as a standalone activity not part of Marcom [sic marketing communications] strategy. It seems to have been set up on a whim and then ignored. I send a monthly report to management but never get any feedback”* (C5). The more advanced businesses confirmed that KPIs are specific to campaign type: *“We choose from the standard grab bag of social media metrics. The specific metrics should be linked to goals. For example if you are looking to increase awareness then it should be about eyeballs on a web property or total reach of your message”* (C9). Both of the agencies agreed with this stance. In addition, C14 had created a global dashboard, which grouped the metrics into different levels of engagement, including: brand awareness (e.g. web visits, search rankings, referrals); appreciation (e.g. page views, time on blog, followers/fans, comments); action (e.g. links clicked, document downloads, registrations); advocacy (e.g. re-tweets, lists, shares).

This is consistent with the increasing development of such dashboards (Bosomworth, 2010; Cvijikj *et al.*, 2012; Marklein and Paine 2013; Pauwels *et al.*, 2009).

Companies use a range of social media metrics. Table 3 shows the number of companies that use each type of metric. Metrics that reflect engagement with the brand are the two most common social media objectives are used by the most companies. These metrics are a subset of the social media metrics suggested by commentators such as Hoffman and Fodor (2011) and Peck (2011), and may well represent the subset that is most useful in B2B contexts.

Table 3: Social media metrics used

Social media metrics	No. of companies using the metrics
Blog visits, Twitter followers	10
Comments, Twitter mentions, re-tweets, Facebook fans,	8
Blog referrers, blog page views	7
Sentiment, Facebook	6
Reach	5
LinkedIn followers	4
Tweets, leads, likes, time on blog, links clicked	3
Share of voice, Klout score, video views.	2

In contrast with data in the Econsultancy (2011), where 39% of companies report not using any type of social media analytics or management software, all interviewees were using one or more tools to support measurement of impact. Most were using free, platform-specific software and felt that no unique tool exists for social media management or reporting across all channels. Cross-platform, paid-for tools are considered expensive and lacking functionality: *“We class Radian 6 as a top tier piece of software but it's still young, clunky to use and takes some perseverance. It's also expensive so most companies will rely on their agency's copy”* (C14). As shown in Table 4, 22 different tools were cited with many of the most common being free and platform-specific such as Tweetdeck for Twitter or Google

Analytics. On average each company was using four different tools and the conclusion is that there is no “Magic Dashboard”: “*There will probably be a couple of tools that emerge as social is still immature and tools will go the same way as email marketing did a few years ago*” (C9). “*I use a lot of different, free tools and it’s quite labour-intensive. I go to Twitter.com, do a social mention report and then LinkedIn. If I had the budget I would buy something to automate it*” (C2). In general, users had many negative comments on the way metrics are gathered, including the need to consult several tools, and the price of paid-for tools. Progress in the metrics tools available to social marketers is important to support the further expansion of investment in social media marketing.

Table 4: Use of social media metrics tools

Social media metrics tools	No. of companies using the tool
Google Analytics	10
Facebook Insights	6
LinkedIn Analytics, Hootsuite, Tweetdeck	5
Tweetreach, Twitter.com, Klout	3
Tweetcounter, internal tools, Radian 6, Social Mention, Addictomatic	2
Socialite Engage, Engage 1-1, Spredfact, Ice Rocket, Slideshare Analytics, ComScore, Sysomos, Socialbaker	1

4.4 The B2B Social Media Engagement Taxonomy

Using insights from discussions on social media adoption and use (4.1), social media marketing objectives (4.2) and social media marketing metrics and evaluation (4.3), in Table 5 we propose a B2B Social Media Engagement Taxonomy. The categorisation centres on the extent of engagement with social media marketing, in terms of its embeddedness in marketing strategy and practice, as demonstrated by its integration with marketing and business strategy, alignment with strategic objectives, and use of metrics for evaluation of performance. The Taxonomy proposes three groups: *social businesses*, *social media users*,

and *social experimenters*, and outlines the characteristics of each of these groups. *Social businesses* are organisations where social media are fully integrated into the business and marketing strategies and processes. *Social media users* are businesses that are competent users of social media, but where commitment to social media remains the prerogative of the marketing department. *Social experimenters* are businesses that are exploring the potential of social media marketing in order to establish how they can realise benefits for their business. The three firms in the social experimenters category were all in the financial services sector, and were not only hesitant about the value of social media marketing to their firm, but also, more widely, to their industry. This hesitancy is consistent with findings from the financial services case study included in Rokka *et al.* (2014). Categorisation on the basis of the Social Media Engagement Taxonomy has some correlation with the firm's length of experience with social media. For example, *social businesses* typically have four or more years social media experience, whilst *social media users* have between one and four years of experience. However, categorisation, or, the nature and extent of social media engagement is also influenced by other factors. For example, although C12 was an early adopter, having started using social media in 2008, their social media manager said: "*metrics are not precise as we're not sure what we need to measure*". On the other hand, C3 only started experimenting in 2011 and launched their main initiative a year later, with full linkage to their business objectives and senior management buy-in: "*I was given a brief by my boss to take the bull by the horns and deliver*".

The B2B Social Media Engagement Taxonomy can be compared with Wilson *et al.* (2011)'s categories of social media strategy, although there are some important distinctions. Their taxonomy is based on the specific components of social media strategies, whereas our study focusses on contribution of social media marketing to achievement of marketing objectives.

Also, their taxonomy is generic, whilst ours focusses on the B2B context. Interestingly, none of the businesses in our study exhibited the characteristics of Wilson *et al.* (2011)'s social media transformer category.

Table 5: The B2B Social Media Engagement Taxonomy

Category	Companies	Profile
Social Businesses	4,6,9,11	In Social businesses, social media objectives are directly linked to business objectives and social media activities are viewed as part of an integrated communications programme. Social media is an integral part of every marketing campaign with objectives and metrics differing per segment. Social media has also started to be integrated beyond marketing and communications into, for example, sales and customer support.
Social Media Users	2,7,8,10,12	Social media users are firm believers in the benefits of social media for their marketing and communications programmes, and anticipate further growth in its importance. Most have fixed standard corporate social media objectives and metrics, and have either not segmented their activities or are just beginning to experiment with doing so. There is very limited integration of social media beyond marketing, apart from occasional instances of the use of social media in customer support.
Social Experimenters	1,3,5	Social experimenters are not yet convinced of the value of social media to their firm, or perhaps even their industry. Whilst marketers may be keen to innovate, conservatism and concerns about brand control and confidentiality amongst senior managers may act as a barrier to developments. Hence, such firms are often late adopters, have vague social media objectives and use standard quantitative metrics. Wider integration of social media beyond marketing is not in evidence.

4.5 Social media strategies

This section presents rich insights into the practices adopted by the companies in developing their social media strategy. Whilst there are practitioner articles and textbooks (e.g. Jarvenpaa and Tuuainen, 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011; Safko, 2010; Shih, 2009; Smith and Zook, 2011) that offer advice on or insights into social media strategies, only Michaelidou *et al.*

(2011) and Jussila *et al.* (2014) have reported on social media use and strategies in a B2B context, hence this section offers a range of new insights from 14 important social media players. The themes that structure this section emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. They are summarised in Table 6, at the end of this section, which presents the B2B Social Media Strategy Framework.

4.5.1 Monitoring and listening

Although there was general acknowledgement of the two-way nature of social media and the importance of monitoring and listening, interviewees particularly commented on the role of this component as a form of market research or auditing in the start-up phase of their social media activities. Interviewees often used an anecdote of a pub or a party, saying that ‘you wouldn’t just walk in and start talking about yourself to strangers’. C14 commented: *“The first stage of any project involves an audit of media consumption and online behaviour of the top ten customers. We also look at what type of engagement they’re having with the brand or their peers”*. C2 sell high value business software on multi-year contracts, which normally involves a long and analytical purchasing process. They realised that many prospects were going on to forums to discuss with their peers, so they started to monitor these conversations: *“We’d monitor some of the discussions and occasionally I would ask the moderator if I could respond to particular questions. When we did, it went well; in fact it sometimes helped us to win business”*. C3 used listening in the early stages of the development of their social media strategy: *“We took 5000 pieces of online content from Twitter, blogs, and forums and were able to build a good picture on sentiment, who was talking about us, what they were saying and the content used. For our media strategy we’ve now identified the top ten blogs that talk about our products”*.

4.5.2 Empowering and engaging employees

As companies' depth of engagement with social media has grown, so has the awareness that effective social media strategies are not the sole prerogative of the marketing department:

“Social is not a marketing phenomenon or a communication channel, it impacts your whole business. In our company it started in Marketing and then moved to Communications leading to a blurring of roles. We're now using it for support and the next step will be Sales teams. However it will soon be integrated into all departments” (C9). “We're working to integrate everyone who's customer-facing and are involving employees in our global brand awareness strategy” (C8). However, some interviewees found enlisting this wider engagement difficult, partly due to lack of management support and partly because it required staff in areas of the business other than marketing or communications to develop new skills in engaging with customers. C12 suggested: *“It's a hard task to build an active community. I think it's important to have someone who is responsible for the overall activity to ensure that it lives and guidelines are respected”.* Others expressed frustration with progress on wider engagement due to lack of management support: *“It can't just be done by me in the digital team, it should involve the whole organisation but dinosaurs doesn't even come close to describing our company”(C1).*

Some *social businesses* have realised their need to engage employees and have created teams of social media experts (25-100 people) who support and train other employees. Several interviewees reported that their company had created social media guidelines as a way of informing their employees on their policies, managing potential issues, and deploying coherent communication across the company and platforms. However, guidelines are only one side of employee empowerment and must be supported by training and skill sharing: *“If we didn't train as many employees as possible, we'd need a central team of about 600 as*

opposed to the current 35 people. To answer this need we've developed training materials and a centre of excellence"(C9). Previous literature discusses empowering employees to ensure consistent messaging (Smith and Zook, 2011) and their role as brand ambassadors (Rokka *et al.*, 2014). Rokka *et al.* (2014) discuss the 'balancing act' concerned with involving employees and managing reputation in social media, suggesting that guidelines and training are only part of the picture.

4.5.3 Creating compelling content

Interviewees agreed with Ahlqvist *et al.* (2008) that content is one of the key criteria for success in social media marketing. According to C6 "*content is king*" and comes in many forms such as blog posts, white papers, videos, tutorials, podcasts, and competitions. If content fills a need then people will find and consume it. Several companies are listening to what their audience want, creating relevant content and ensuring it stands out from the crowd: "*Content and social media go hand in hand, you can't just be there retweeting and saying good morning, you need to put some substance behind it*" (C2).

Many interviewees commented on the need to have a less formal tone of voice than in traditional marketing channels, and well as the need to put a personal face to the brand through the content. This dimension of style has received very little attention in the literature (Wightman, 2011). Interviewees suggested that people react better to people than to faceless corporations. Authors who write well and express interesting views were regarded as a particularly valuable asset: "*We have a passionate, opinionated blogger who writes well and is sometimes picked up within the industry. Our most successful campaign was around the Eurozone summits and linked to our press activity. The good results were due to the combination of the person writing, the interesting content and timeliness of it*" (C5).

4.5.4 Stimulating eWOM

Interviewees recognised that their social media presence was not limited to the messages that the company placed on social media platforms, but could be accentuated and amplified through eWOM. Critical to this process are the company's network of influencers, who were often identified during the listening stage of a campaign: *"We're often engaging with editors, freelancers, institutions, associations, event organisers, not just customers and prospects. We call this the web of influence which is easier to reach through social channels"* (C14). To reach online influencers many companies have adapted their traditional media relations programmes to include new targets such as bloggers: *"At a PR level we'd never engaged with bloggers in the way we're engaged with journalists. Now we need to develop a digital advocacy programme and treat them the same way"* (C3). Twitter has been shown as a good way of amplifying messages and creating eWOM. Its short format and immediacy is particularly relevant in the "attention economy" (Jansen *et al.*, 2009). Swani *et al.* (2014) find significant differences between B2C and B2B twitter feeds, particularly in terms of their branding and selling strategies, and message appeals, suggesting that there is more to learn about B2B businesses effective use of Twitter to stimulate eWOM. Other important drivers of traffic to specific platforms are content and engagement with influencers and customers: *"Engaging in forums worked really well because none of our competitors were doing it. If you come from a problem-solving angle you create awareness and may get referrals later on"* (C2). This is consistent with discussions elsewhere on B2B digital content marketing (Holliman and Rowley, 2014), but there is further scope for understanding the role of content in capturing interest and stimulating eWOM on different social media platforms.

4.5.5 Evaluating and selecting channels

For very large companies running multiple campaigns, social media channel choice will be critical. Thirteen different channels were mentioned; the top five, in order, were LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Company Blog, and YouTube. This pre-eminence of LinkedIn, followed by Facebook, Twitter and blogging is borne out by Brennan and Croft (2012), whilst Culnan *et al.* (2010), embracing both B2C and B2B large US companies, suggest that the most popular platforms are Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and client-related forums. Since LinkedIn is a B2B professional network, it is unsurprising that it is the most used channel. Special interest groups (Sarkkinen, 2009) are of particular interest, and can be used to create customer groups for support or product co-creation. C10 makes extensive use of these facilities: *“All of our customer user groups are on LinkedIn. We have around 400 users in each of our product groups and they’ve taken on a life of their own. Customers can get best practice information that might not be available from technical support”*. Whilst such interactions are highly valuable for companies, some of the sample felt that they were too time-consuming. To overcome this, one company does not add original content but rather syndicated content from their other online channels.

In addition to their presence on LinkedIn, all of the respondents except one had an active Twitter account and all but two had a Facebook presence. Indeed, these two platforms now seem to be mandatory channels for any social media strategy. Twitter was viewed positively and seen as a good way of spreading word about content and is a way of creating eWOM (Jansen *et al.*, 2009) despite lacking its own content, and the short lifecycle of each tweet. Twitter can also be used to segment communications and target for customer support and direct engagement. C4 typifies the attitude toward Twitter: *“Twitter, in particular, has been very good at raising brand awareness”*.

On the other hand, interviewees were at best ambivalent about Facebook: *“I feel that Facebook is where I talk about myself and Twitter is where I talk about others. For B2B companies talking about themselves it is difficult to get people to interact”* (C12). This raises an interesting point about the different uses of each channel and their place in people’s personal and professional lives: *“I feel that corporate pages on Facebook are less appropriate for B2B companies; we have one but I’m not sure what the point is”* (C6). This view is consistent with Econsultancy (2011)’s finding that some B2B respondents had streamlined their Facebook contributions.

Although company blogs were used by fewer companies, they were the channel which attracted the most praise. In line with Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), interviewees suggested that blogs are effective for engaging with customers and prospects in a B2B context as there is often a potential purchase behind customer’s online research as they are looking for advice from the seller: *“In B2B marketing, it’s simple, you need to be the best and advise your customers. There’s nothing better than a blog as it puts your experts’ views in front of your audience online”* (C6). Another reason that blogs are favoured is that they can help Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) since Google gives higher search rankings to frequently updated sites: *“We use it in a strategic way to drive key search terms, it took us about one and half years to get it performing well but the blog has now become the top driver of traffic to our web site”* (C11). While many organisations were looking for ways to make their web more social, one company took this to the extreme and replaced their web site with a blog, which has increased traffic but is less effective for corporate communications. C13 recommends that clients set up a blog to put their experts in front of customers and prospects and as a hub for content. Finally, Google+ was seen a channel with potential, because of its link to SEO.

4.5.6 Enhancing brand presence by integrating social media

Most respondents felt that social media activities have a positive impact on brand presence by increasing the number of touch points and thereby findability on the web: *“Social media is a way of spreading content by increasing the numbers of touch points. It is this rather than just traffic to your web site that raises awareness as you are providing content where and when people want it.”*(C9). *“Our SEO has been helped by the blog as we now often appear in the first 5 results in Google for our core search terms”* (C12). Blogs were particularly effective in enhancing touch points, since they meet Google’s search criteria in terms of being updated frequently, tagged and linked heavily to other sites. In addition, a multi-channel social approach helps fill up the first page of the organic search results. There was also evidence that social media activities were a driver of traffic to companies other web properties, with C4 attributing more than 100,000 visits to their social media efforts. The complementary nature of social media is summed up by C3: *“The use of social media doesn’t mean that we just use Twitter and stop our email marketing; social activities are complementary to what we’re doing already”*.

Insert Table 6 Here

5. Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

All of the B2B companies in the study were engaged in social media marketing, although the extent of engagement varied, depending partly on how long the companies had been engaged with social media marketing, and partly on senior management commitment and interest. We propose the B2B Social Media Engagement Taxonomy, with three categories, based on the extent to which the social media marketing is embedded in marketing and business strategies: *social businesses, social media users, and social experimenters*. The taxonomy is useful in

benchmarking social media marketing programmes. Whilst, despite their different bases for classification, there are similarities between our taxonomy and the categories proposed by Wilson *et al.* (2011) for B2C social media strategies, there is no evidence in our study of firms exhibiting the characteristics of Wilson *et al.* (2011)'s most engaged category, social media transformers, and it may be that this category is not appropriate for B2B organisations. Nevertheless, it is possible that B2B Social Media Engagement Taxonomy might have transferrability to B2C organisations. Further research to develop taxonomies of social media engagement would develop a benchmarking framework that would have applications for both researchers and practitioners.

An important basis for differentiation between companies is their social media marketing objectives. Most participants reported clear social media objectives, with enhancing brand image/reputation and extending brand awareness being important. In keeping with other commentators there is evidence that brand reputation is especially important in B2B contexts (Bendixen *et al.*, 2004; Glynn, 2012; Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006), and according to Rokka, *et al.* (2014) attention should be directed towards how employee engagement is cultivated to enhance brand reputation. On the other hand, in contrast to commentaries that focus on the B2C context (Christodoulides, 2009; Fournier and Avery, 2011), there was less concern that brand reputations might deliberately be compromised by customers or expectations of a struggle over control of the brand. On the contrary, these B2B companies viewed social media as an opportunity to cultivate customer engagement, and to strengthen their relationships with the other businesses who were their customers. This echoes earlier research on the value of internet technologies to B2B companies in relationship building and communication (Bauer *et al.*, 2002; Sharma, 2002; Smith and Zook, 2011) and is consistent with (Michaelidou *et al.* (2011)'s findings that attracting new customers and cultivating customer relationships are the

most important social media objectives for B2B SME's. On this basis, we suggest that it can not be assumed that the challenges and opportunities that social media pose for B2B and B2C companies are the same, supporting the case for further research into the use of social media in B2B sectors.

This study concurs with others that suggest that metrics are still under development (e.g. Smith and Zook, 2011). Participants are keen to align objectives and metrics, and do use a range of different metrics to seek to measure the impact of their social media activities, but they are not yet confident that they are using the optimum metrics, and certainly have some strong reservations about the tools available to them to generate metrics. However, given that only a subset of the metrics suggested by commentators (Hoffman and Fodor, 2011; Peck, 2011) or incorporated into dashboards (Marklein and Paine 2013; Pauwels *et al.*, 2009) are used by participants in this study. Hence, taking into account the differences of the social media marketing objectives of the B2C and B2B sector, another area for further research may be the sectoral differences in appropriate metrics, understanding of which could inform the development of specific B2B dashboards.

Finally, this study also uncovered a considerable degree of consensus as to the key components of a successful social media strategy. We propose the B2B Social Media Strategy Framework and identify the following as its six key components: monitoring and listening in the social space; empowering and engaging employees, and thereby extending the social media strategy beyond the marketing department; creating compelling content, including putting a 'personal' face to the brand; stimulating eWOM, through targeting influencers; evaluating and selecting channels, taking into account the characteristics of the channels and audiences; and, integrating social media marketing into wider web and other

marketing strategies. Whilst previous researchers and commentators, in both the B2C and B2B context have identified one or more of these components as contributing to a successful social media strategy, no prior work has specifically proposed an empirically informed framework of key components of a social media strategy for B2B companies. Further research should develop the framework to embrace both B2B and B2C contexts to act as an organising framework that would have utility for both theory and practice.

On the basis of this research we suggest that B2B organisations need to consider the potential of social media for their businesses, and frame their social media strategy accordingly. B2B organisations often have an ongoing commitment to building and maintaining relationships with their customers. Social media are a new arena that offers potential. Organisations, specifically need to:

1. Experiment – in order to develop an understanding of which strategic and marketing objectives social media can help them to achieve
2. Evaluate – seek out measures and metrics for assessing the performance of a social media strategy and associated investment
3. Embed – seek integration of social media marketing and communication with customers across all departments and activities in the organisation where its use might be beneficial
4. Engage – with the key components of a social media strategy: monitoring and listening, empowering and engaging employees, creating compelling content, stimulating eWOM, evaluating and selecting channels, and enhancing brand presence through integration.

Whilst this study makes a useful contribution in an area in which there has been very little previous research, like all research its scope is limited. It would, for instance be interesting to conduct further research studies with a greater focus on specific sectors, differentiating perhaps between B2B businesses where there is a tradition of long relationships with customers and those in which relationships are more volatile. Another area of potential interest might be to examine the particular value of social media, and the design of social media marketing strategies for businesses where co-creation in innovation is the norm. Understanding the role and contribution of different social media platforms, and their respective suitability for meeting different marketing objectives is also important; it will be important to drill beyond the generic approach adopted in this study. In particular, given the findings regarding the value of company blogs, it would be important to explore further the use and effectiveness of brand websites with social media components. In addition, it is very evident that social media marketing practices are evolving rapidly, so it will be important to undertake some replication of this study in the following few years. It is particularly important that such replication embraces businesses and their social media practices, not only in Western countries, but also in developing countries, and in the Middle East, India and China.

Other avenues for further research emerge from the findings of this study. For example, it would be useful to explore the application of our B2B Social Media Engagement Taxonomy benchmarking. Similarly, it would be useful to undertake studies, either on an in-depth case study basis, or on a survey basis to develop knowledge of how social media marketing can be exploited to drive brand value and equity, and, more generally to respond to the increasingly active debate regarding the return-on-investment associated with social media marketing. In a recent research focussed largely in the B2C sector, we argue that pivotal to advancing the

design of metrics dashboards, is the development of understanding and models regarding the integration of metrics, and KPI's into marketing decision-making processes (the authors, *Submitted*) In addition, further research that developed a richer picture of best practice or key performance indicators in relation to social media marketing strategies would be beneficial.

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Table 6: The B2B Social Media Strategy Framework

Component	Summary	Key processes	Challenges
Monitoring and listening	Participating by listening generates valuable market research and customer knowledge. An essential and ongoing aspect of managing a social media presence, it is particularly important in the start-up phase.	Intelligent listening to peer-to-peer conversations. Politely seeking the permission to contribute, through a moderator if available. Analysing chat to learn about what people are talking about, what they say about the brand, and who the brand opinion leaders are.	Adapting from promoting a message and expecting people to listen to participating in a conversation. Choosing when to participate, to maximise effect, and minimise offence. Interpreting chat analysis and determining response strategies.
Empowering and engaging employees	Engagement in the social media strategy needs to extend beyond the marketing department, and involve a range of employees in other parts of the company. Success is dependent on management support. Employees contributing to the company's social media presence need guidelines and training.	Top management support to involve employees throughout the company in social media chat. Appointing a social media leader. Managing social media contributions from different departments, especially customer support and sales. Developing and promoting social media policies and guidelines. Training and updating staff on making a contribution to the company's social media presence.	Getting top management to understand the need for social media involvement to permeate the company. Gaining top management buy-in to the social media strategy and the benefits associated with the involvement of their staff. Achieving consistency of message and tone of voice, whilst being sensitive to different functions (e.g. customer support) and audiences. Managing many-to-many communications.
Creating compelling content	Compelling content is one of the key contributors to success. It is important to put a personal 'face' to the brand through the style, expertise and views of the contributor.	Ensuring interesting, relevant, compelling and timely content, in a variety of different formats. Undergoing a cultural change from selling to helping and problem-solving. Communicating 'person-to-person', as if building a long term B2B sales relationship, rather than trying to make a quick win through a one off-marketing message.	Understanding and predicting audience perceptions regarding usefulness, relevance, compelling and timely. Learning to build trust and community engagement through being helpful.
Stimulating eWOM	Social media presence and impact can be	Building a community of brand influencers.	Maintaining a dynamic community of

	<p>enhanced by targeting and working with influencers who will generate and stimulate e-WOM</p> <p>Companies need to choose channels in the light of their customers and audiences. For B2B, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and company blogs are important.</p>	<p>Developing a digital advocacy programme to engage bloggers and other influencers. Seeking strategies to create eWOM, through Twitter and other platforms.</p> <p>Evaluating and continuing to monitor the characteristics and communities associated with different channels.</p> <p>Evaluating channels for their contribution to SEO, content delivery, and eWOM. Developing and evolving social media metrics dashboards.</p> <p>Developing and promoting strategies and policies in relation to communication and social media presence for each channel.</p>	<p>brand influencers over the longer term. Accepting and accommodating the lack of control over the brand messages emanating from influencers and bloggers. Investing in creating eWOM on several channels.</p> <p>Finding the resources necessary to undertake monitoring and evaluation of channels to inform future strategy and switching.</p> <p>Maintaining a watching brief on channel developments.</p> <p>Selecting and interpreting social media metrics that align with marketing and campaign objectives.</p>
Evaluating and selecting channels		<p>Establishing and maintaining a presence on more than one social media platform to maximise touchpoints.</p> <p>Maintaining a dynamic blog, to enhance visibility and links.</p> <p>Embedding social media marketing within the wider marketing communications strategy.</p>	<p>Time consuming nature of maintaining several social media presences.</p> <p>Deciding on and tailoring content for different platforms.</p> <p>Ongoing management of the relationship between different social media and web presences.</p>
Enhancing brand presence through integrating social media	<p>Social media can enhance web presence for the brand by increasing the number of touch points, which in turn may impact on Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), and web traffic.</p>		