

How do managers work with digital communication media in international business relationships? Focus group results of managers' experiences of digital media use for relationship building.

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In a qualitative study about international business negotiations and personal business relationships carried out a few years ago, results showed that relationship building and maintenance was something that occupied most international negotiators' minds. It was stressed that meeting in person with due frequency was a requirement and that contact was kept in between meetings via telephone and email. However, some unexpected results were found indicating that the respondents experienced problems attached to developing and maintaining business relationships via email and video conferencing.

With this in mind, the author participated in a focus group consisting of seven managers with vast experience of international negotiation, with the purpose of finding out whether digital business communication behavior has changed over the last ten years.

The new results showed that struggling with heavy workloads, the participants welcomed communication technology that could save them a trip or two, but emphasized that for relationship initiation and building, meeting physically is still a requirement. The picture given about emailing was to some extent different compared with the older study, since it was no longer looked upon as a problem but as a part of everyday work. However, it became clear that the (in) formality used in emails was adapted to the stage of development of the business relationship, to the seniority of the counterpart and to his/her cultural background. The participants also discussed their experiences of videoconferencing, stating that after having tried new technology, they had to a large extent returned to traditional telephone conferences, only now those conferences took place via Skype.

In conclusion, the results show that traditional marketing activities and communication media prevail: personal meetings, telephone conferences and emails are the preferred ways of communicating. Digital communication media is used whenever it allows for traditional B2B behavior. All communication, regardless of which medium is used, is adapted to the cultural background and seniority of the recipient, and to the stage of development of the relationship. Most likely, the choice of medium is determined by the preferences of the

buying firm.

1 Introduction

Within the fields of international business negotiations and B2B marketing, personal selling and personal business relationships to customers has traditionally played a vital role for company success (Cavusgil, Deligonul and Yaprak 2005; Nilsson Molnár 1997; Brosan 2012; Houtari et al. 2015). This was further examined in a study (Torsein 2010) based on 25 in-depth interviews with company owners, executives, area sales managers and export managers employed in Swedish small and medium sized firms. The results indicated that personal relationships are initiated and developed through extensive communication, preferably in person, but with time the relationship can be maintained with the help of other communications media, such as telephone, emailing and videoconferencing. Meeting regularly in person was however still considered a necessity. It was also found that initially, cultural differences may obstruct communication, but with time and maintained frequency in communications, the impact of cultural differences tend to diminish.

The qualitative approach of the study allowed for some unexpected results: Respondents spontaneously described problems associated with maintaining business relationships via email. Although emailing was used in everyday work, respondents stressed the risks for miscommunication leading to unnecessary conflict and time delay. As a tool for initializing a business relationship, email was considered a waste of time: Some respondents clearly stated that they would never consider doing business with anyone they had not first met in person. In fact, any medium available was deemed inferior to a personal meeting, the main reason being that they did not allow for the same richness in the information provided by personal interaction, where the spoken word is complemented by mimics, gestures, tone of voice, milieu, etc.

Since the study described above was carried out, digital communications media has gone through tremendous development, and international and B2B marketers now have a number of different communication media at their disposal. Along with emailing and webpages, marketers now have the opportunity to communicate with customers and consumers via social media, such as Facebook and Linked-in, and videoconferencing can be carried out via platforms such as Skype.

Recent studies within the field of digital B2B communication and marketing tend to focus on B2B use of social media for marketing and relationship building purposes (Habibi et al. 2015; Keinänen and Kuivalainen 2015; Broekemier, Chau and Seshadri 2015; Huotari et al. 2015). These studies emphasize that the interactive qualities of social media, together with the social needs of individuals and the importance of personal relationships within B2B marketing would imply that social media could substantially support relationship building. However, they come to the conclusion that B2B firms are not taking advantage of the full potential of social media, and that B2B firms still rely on traditional marketing and communication tools including personal meetings, telephone calls and emails.

Other studies focus on the role digital channels in general play in B2B marketing (Brosan 2012; Holliman and Rowley 2014; Karjaluoto, Mustonen and Ulkuniemi 2015). These studies affirm that traditional media and marketing tools prevail in the B2B sector. Although social media may be considered a useful tool for relationship development, buyers still tend to rely on websites and emails (Brosan 2012). In fact, social media may not be suitable for B2B relationships when considering company needs for confidentiality and protection of competitive advantage (Karjaluoto, Mustonen and Ulkuniemi 2015). Buyers tend to show less interest in general information available to all, but are more concerned to get information and benefits that may solve their current problems (Keinänen and Kuivalainen 2015). Consequently, any message distributed through digital media should have value for customers, i.e. help them to solve a problem or to help them do something more efficiently (Holliman and Rowley 2014).

The studies suggest several ways to make social media more applicable to B2B firms, including

educating employees in social media communication, with the purpose of empowering and encouraging them to be active on social media (Houtari et al. 2015). Factors deemed to impact B2B use of social media marketing included organizational culture and company resources, knowledge and capabilities (Habibi et al. 2015) and private use of social media, colleagues' support, and perceptions of the usability of social media for B2B communication purposes (Keinänen and Kuivalainen 2015) among others.

The recent research within the field presented above show that the authors agree that B2B companies lag behind B2C companies in regards to identifying and grasping the market opportunities associated with digital media, in favor of traditional forms of communication and marketing. In respect to the development of personal relationships with the support of digital communication, whether traditional or not, there is a consistent lack of focus in the presented sources. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of how managers work with digital communication as a means to initiate, develop, and maintain personal business relationships, and whether the advent of digital media has changed how such relationships are built.

2 Methodology

In consideration of the aim of this paper, an explorative approach was deemed necessary. By chance, the author was invited to a focus group organized by IUC Väst (Industry Development Centre West), an organization belonging to a nation-wide Swedish network of another 11 similar regional companies, working with development projects and innovation in collaboration with small and medium sized firms.

The focus groups consisted of seven representatives from small and medium sized Swedish companies active within the industrial sector. Their job titles and tasks were similar to those of the group of respondents who had been interviewed for the original study. The aim of the focus group was to discuss personal meetings with customers in relation to new communication technology, addressing questions about whether the conditions for building and maintaining personal business relationships have altered because of developments in communication technology, and whether there are situations where videoconferences can substitute personal meetings.

The focus group session began with the author giving a brief introduction to the topic, and discussion began spontaneously before the introduction was completed. In all, the group discussion lasted for over two hours. The participants proved to share their experiences quite openly and generously, demonstrating both interest and vast knowledge within the field. For instance, examples of communication via digital media with both Swedish and international customers and suppliers were shared.

Apart from participating in the discussion, the author simultaneously took notes, and ended up with a relatively rich material considering the intensity of the discussion. Since the author attended the focus group without the purpose of gathering primary data, IUC Väst and each participant were later asked for their permission to use the material for this paper, to which all agreed.

3 Findings

In the initial phase of the group discussion, the respondents spoke in positive terms of digital communication media and claimed to use it quite a lot in their daily work. All testified to have requiring work positions, and whenever time could be saved with the use of information technology, they experienced relief. However, as the discussion continued, it became clear that quite a limited set of digital media was used. In addition, different media was considered appropriate for different communication purposes, depending on the depth and nature of business relations and cultural background of customers.

In the original study, emailing was claimed to sometimes be a source of misunderstandings and time delays. This picture was not embraced by the focus group participants, who did not consider emailing to be a source of problems but as part of everyday work, and a natural medium for keeping contact and exchanging information with customers. Other media used for these purposes were text messaging via both Skype and mobile phones, and audio conferences, also carried out via Skype. Concerning text messages delivered via mobile phones, the participants stressed that this was only considered appropriate for business relationships that were characterized by a high degree of trust and informality. The use of mobile text messages was considered to be intruding on the other party's privacy, and must be handled with utmost care, the respondents concluded.

Concerning email communication and messaging via Skype, the respondents stated that communication was adapted to the seniority and cultural background of the recipient, and to the degree of trust and informality characterizing the business relationship. In contact with representatives from cultures perceived as more formal than Swedish culture, such as Germans and Chinese, the respondents adhered to a more formal way of expressing themselves. In contrast, when communicating with younger counterparts, coming from more informal cultures such as the Scandinavian cultures and the Netherlands, and when the relationship was characterized by trust and informality, communication was less formal. Under such circumstances, the general view was that the use of emoticons was increasing. In contact with counterparts from more formal cultures, use of emoticons was perceived as inappropriate.

In regards to videoconferencing and the use of Skype, the respondents stated that after trying videoconferencing, they had switched to audio conferences instead, resembling traditional telephone meetings. One respondent admitted that his organization had initially used too much technology, but had soon returned to telephone meetings. The reason mentioned for abandoning videoconferencing was that the technology was insufficient and therefore caused problems and time delays. Technology must work for both parties involved, otherwise it becomes an obstacle rather than a useful communication medium. Another advantage with telephone conferencing stated was the fact that the respondents do not have to dress up, and can participate from home if necessary.

The respondents also brought up e-procurement, which was not appreciated at all, since it does not allow for communication and relationship building. On the other hand, e-fairs or "dating-sites" were mentioned in more positive terms, as traditional fairs were considered somewhat inefficient and time consuming.

Social media was not brought up as a medium for customer communication, save its possibilities for fast image transferal. Sending or receiving a picture of a damaged product was given as an example of when communication of images was more efficient than explaining the problem in words, which could be a complicated and time consuming process regardless of which medium is used.

The respondents agreed that digital communication media were useful for some types of activities and customers, such as monitoring, coordinating activities with distributors, and for maintaining existing relationships. Digital communication media were considered inappropriate for initiating and building new relationships and for exchange of complex information. For these activities, traditional B2B communication methods including physical meetings, personal interaction and selling were considered superior, whereas for relationship initiation and building, meeting physically is still a requirement. This is in accordance with the results of the original study.

4 Discussion

Drawing from the results from both the original study and the focus group, along with literature findings within the area, it is clear that marketing and communication tools, media and methods used by B2B firms tend to be quite stable over time. Even though digital media are used on a daily basis, they complement traditional forms of communication in the work of maintaining existing business relationships rather than for creating and developing new ones.

Emailing, which was mentioned both as part of everyday work but also in relation to misunderstandings and time delay in the original study, was not perceived in this way by the participants of the focus group. In the literature, emailing was concluded to be one of the most commonly used digital media (Habibi et al. 2015; Keinänen and Kuivalainen 2015; Broekemier, Chau and Seshadri 2015; Huotari et al. 2015; Brosan 2012; Holliman and Rowley 2014; Karjaluo, Mustonen and Ulkuniemi 2015), to the extent that it is now classified as a traditional medium. The fact that the focus group participants did not experience any problems, but carefully adapted their email messages in accordance with the cultural background and seniority of the recipient, and to the depth and stage of the relationship, indicates that with extensive use and general acceptance of this communication medium for both selling and buying organizations, general etiquette rules for email behavior may have been developed and become widely used. This is an area that calls for further study.

In the original study, videoconferencing was mentioned in negative terms, and in the literature it was barely mentioned at all. The focus group participants agreed that they preferred audio conferences, which were mainly carried out via Skype. Although a digital medium is used, the communication behavior is that of a traditional telephone conference. Apparently, video transferal technology is not yet satisfactory, and thus deemed inefficient. In this case, digital media allows B2B marketers to carry on with traditional communication behavior, why the participants used Skype quite frequently.

Messaging via Skype or other media, or by mobile phones, was mentioned by the focus group participants as another communication medium used for shorter messages. This communication form was also reserved for developed business relationships with counterparts from more informal cultures, such as Scandinavians and Dutchmen. Text messaging was not mentioned at all in the literature. However, Keinänen and Kuivalainen (2015) stress that private social media use affect professional use of social media, since individuals tend to use the same behavior in both private and professional life. The use of text messaging is most probably an example of this, as the participants highlight the importance of only sending mobile text messages to business contacts where the relationship is well established and characterized by informality, which would allow for a behavior used in private life. Since text messaging as a means for B2B marketing and communication was a neglected area in the literature, it deserves to be further researched.

In line with the original study and with the literature (Brosan 2012; Holliman and Rowley 2014; Karjaluo, Mustonen and Ulkuniemi 2015), the focus group participants agreed that meeting personally and physically is still the superior B2B marketing tool, since it is the most suitable tool available given the fact that the main objective of B2B marketing activities is to build and maintain business relationships. The participants made it clear that digital media, often used in traditional ways, should only be used for maintaining existing relationships, not for initiating and building new ones. Communication via digital media must be adapted to the stage of development of the relationship. Although many studies stress that social media characteristics should be advantageous for developing business relationships (Habibi et al. 2015; Keinänen and Kuivalainen 2015; Broekemier, Chau and Seshadri 2015; Huotari et al. 2015), they all conclude that these advantages are not fully realized by B2B firms. However, in consideration of the characteristics of industrial markets, where complex deals involving high risk and high value are negotiated over large amounts of time, the need for development of business relationships based on trust becomes obvious (Torsein 2010). In addition, in situations of fierce competition, the need for confidentiality and for the protection of competitive advantage is essential (Karjaluo, Mustonen and Ulkuniemi 2015). Under such circumstances, traditional forms for communication are the most beneficial, whereas social media, given their characteristics of open access to information, are not. This may be the reason why buying firms tend to be quite uninterested in social media for business relationship purposes (Brosan 2012). As long as the buying firm prefers communication via traditional media and methods, the selling firm must continue to use them.

5 Conclusions

Traditionally, B2B marketing has relied on personal selling and development of long term business relationships. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of how managers work with digital communication as a means to initiate, develop, and maintain personal business relationships, and whether the advent of digital media has changed how such relationships are built.

The results show that traditional marketing activities and communication media prevail: personal meetings, telephone conferences and emails are the preferred ways of communicating. When initiating and developing new relations, personal meetings are deemed more appropriate, but when the purpose is to maintain an existing relationship, personal meetings can be complemented by telephone, audio conferences via Skype, and email. Well-developed relationships characterized by informality can be maintained with the help of text messaging. Digital communication media is used whenever it allows for traditional B2B behavior. All communication, regardless of which medium is used, is adapted to the cultural background and seniority of the recipient, and to the stage of development of the relationship. Most likely, the choice of medium is determined by the preferences of the buying firm.

The results of this study are based on a relatively small qualitative material. The results however suggest that B2B marketers select digital communication media that allow them to communicate most efficiently with their customers, and that they adapt their messages to the recipient. Since traditional marketing activities prevail in the B2B market, digital media that support those activities are used.

Poznámky/Notes

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Klíčové slová/Key Words

digital communication, digital media, international business, focus group
digitálna komunikácia, digitálne médiá, medzinárodný obchod, focus group

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Résumé

Ako pracujú manažéri s digitálnymi komunikačnými médiami v medzinárodných obchodných vzťahoch? Výsledky focus group o skúsenostiach manažérov s používaním digitálnych médií pri budovaní vzťahov.

V kvalitatívnej štúdii o medzinárodných obchodných rokovaniach a osobných obchodných vzťahoch vypracovanej pred niekoľkými rokmi výsledky ukázali, že budovanie a starostlivosť o vzťahy je niečo, čo zaberá pozornosť väčšiny medzinárodných vyjednávačov. Bolo dokázané, že osobné stretnutia s náležitou frekvenciou opakovania sú vyslovene požiadavkou a že kontakt medzi stretnutiami bol udržiavaný naďalej prostredníctvom telefónu a e-mailu. Avšak objavili sa aj niektoré neočakávané výsledky, ktoré naznačujú, že respondenti mali problémy s rozvíjaním a udržiavaním obchodných vzťahov prostredníctvom e-mailu a videokonferencie.

S ohľadom na túto skutočnosť sa autor zapojil do výskumu s cieľovou skupinou skladajúcou sa zo siedmich vedúcich pracovníkov s bohatými skúsenosťami z prostredia medzinárodného vyjednávania s cieľom zistiť, či sa digitálne správanie v obchodnej komunikácii zmenilo v priebehu posledných desiatich rokov.

Nové výsledky ukázali, že v boji s ťažkým pracovným vyťažením účastníci uvítali komunikačné technológie, ktoré im môžu zachrániť kúsok pracovného času, ale zdôraznili, že pre začatie a budovanie vzťahov je fyzický kontakt stále nevyhnutnosťou. V tomto kontexte je posielanie e-mailov do istej miery odlišné v porovnaní so staršou štúdiou, pretože tento druh komunikácie už nepredstavoval problém, ale bol súčasťou každodennej práce.

Avšak, bolo jasné, že (ne) formalita používaná v e-mailoch bola prispôsobená konkrétnej fázy vývoja obchodného vzťahu, napríklad sa menila v závislosti od veku náprotivku a od kultúrneho zázemia. Účastníci tiež diskutovali o svojich skúsenostiach s videokonferenciami poznamenajúc, že potom, čo si vyskúšali novú technológiu sa museli do značnej miery vrátiť k tradičnej telefónnej konferencii, až teraz sa tieto konferencie uskutočňujú cez Skype.

Záverom možno povedať, že výsledky ukazujú, že tradičné marketingové aktivity a médiá prevládajú: osobné stretnutia, telefónne konferencie a e-mailly sú preferované spôsoby komunikácie. Digitálne komunikačné médiá sa používajú vždy, keď je to možné pre tradičné B2B správanie. Všetka komunikácia, bez ohľadu na používané médium, je prispôsobená kultúrnemu pozadiu a seniority príjemcu a hlavne stupňu vývoja vzťahu. S najväčšou pravdepodobnosťou je voľba média daná tým,

čo preferuje nakupujúca firma.

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