Understanding and Defining the Corporate Influencer in Business-to-Business Sales – First Insights from an Interview Study

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UNDERSTANDING AND DEFINING THE CORPORATE INFLUENCER IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS SALES – FIRST INSIGHTS FROM AN INTERVIEW STUDY

Research in Progress

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Abstract

While the importance of social media and influencer marketing for business-to-consumer markets is already widely recognized, such approaches have long been uncharted territory in business-to-business contexts. Nevertheless, a growing number of business-to-business salespersons adopt social media for their sales activities and begin to enact a role that we conceptualize as the corporate influencer. In order to empirically explore this emerging role, we conducted an interview study with ten experts who themselves serve as corporate influencers. Based on our qualitative data analysis, this study gives a description of their tasks and objectives as well as their characteristics, skills, and requirements. We also suggest a preliminary definition of the corporate influencer which has been lacking so far in academic literature. Finally, we outline how we plan to proceed with this study and which implications for future research our first insights already yield.

Keywords: Corporate Influencer, Business-to-Business, Social Media Marketing, Interview Study.

1 Introduction

Social media has become one of the defining technologies of our time (Appel et al., 2020) and is here to stay (Guesalaga, 2016). Accessibility of information through social media is higher than ever before (Agnihotri et al., 2016). Customers are no longer passive receivers of information but can actively seek for information (Batra and Keller, 2016) when and how they want (Schultz, Schwepker, and Good, 2012a). Social media already is the number one source for receiving and sharing information about products, services, brands, and firms (Appel et al., 2020), making customers more knowledgeable, interconnected and powerful in buyer-seller relationships (Agnihotri et al., 2016). Firms are also moving towards social media with their sales activities (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015). Salespersons are increasingly required to generate new leads and maintain relationships with existing customers via professional social networks (Bill, Feurer, and Klarmann, 2020). Recognizing their boundary spanning role towards customers (Guesalaga, 2016) and the growing relevance of social media use in sales (Marshall et al., 2012), individual employees of the sales organization are encouraged to adopt social media in order to interact with their customers (Guesalaga, 2016). In many cases, employees join professional social networks like LinkedIn on their own initiative, too. Thereby, they can play a significant role in representing their firm (Mukerjee, 2014). Some of the salespersons are heavy users, who have a large number of ties to other people (Goldenberg et al., 2009). They can generate (electronic) word-of-mouth about products, services, the brand, or the firm directly through their posts on social media (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks, 2019). Such exposed people are usually labelled as influencers (Appel et al., 2020; Lanz et al., 2019).
Especially in business-to-consumer (B2C) markets, the topic of influencer marketing in social media has already been researched extensively (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks, 2019; Wang, Aribarg, and Atchadé, 2019). In contrast, literature on influencers in business-to-business (B2B) markets still remains scarce. First findings on the positive effects on lead generation and customer relationships (Lacka and Chong, 2016; Rodriguez, Peterson, and Krishnan, 2012) call for more academic research on social media adoption and use in B2B sales.

With this study, we explore the role of influencers in B2B sales organizations, which we consider to be a novel and emerging phenomenon. We conceptualize this role as the corporate influencer. In order to better understand this role, we pose the following research question: *What dimensions define the role of a corporate influencer in B2B sales organizations?*

To enlighten this research question, we conduct an interview study. So far, we have already interviewed ten experts who enact the corporate influencer role themselves. Our analysis of the interview data resulted in a set of categories and dimensions that describe their tasks and objectives as well as their characteristics, skills, and requirements. Based on these preliminary empirical insights, we suggest a definition of the corporate influencer role, which has been lacking in academic literature.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Next, we provide the research background on social media use and influencer marketing (Section 2). In Section 3, we explain our qualitative-empirical research approach. Then, we present our preliminary findings from the interviews in Section 4. We close with a discussion of limitations and steps for future research (Section 5).

## 2 Research Background

### 2.1 Social media in B2B markets

Social media can be defined as “[...] a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media offers a technical basis for digital two-way interactions between users of a social network, which is a “set of actors and the relationships (ties) among them” (Goldenberg et al., 2009, p. 2). They are platforms for connecting, interacting, communicating, and sharing information. Through social media, information can be disseminated faster and more easily than before (de Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders, 2017). Social media allows for greater personalization and individualization of content at any time and location (Batra and Keller, 2016). The fast adoption of social media has changed the way people interact with the world and with each other.

The adoption of social media has also extended quickly beyond private life to the business level (Almazyad and Loiacono, 2020). Social media’s influences on human communication behavior are expected to change entire buying processes (Andersson and Wikström, 2017). However, in contrast to B2C markets, social media is still a relatively new concept for B2B practitioners and researchers (Högberg, 2018; Jussila, Kärkkäinen, and Aramo-Immonen, 2014) as the B2B environment tends to be different and lag behind in social media adoption. In B2B markets, buying decisions are made by organizations and not by single consumers. This makes the interaction between sellers and customers during the B2B buying processes more complex, personal and intense (Jussila, Kärkkäinen, and Aramo-Immonen, 2014). Compared to B2C firms, B2B firms tend to have fewer customers with whom, however, they maintain rather long-lasting relationships (Järvinen et al., 2012). In B2B markets, we observe an underestimation of the importance of social media (Lacka and Chong, 2016), a high uncertainty about how to use and apply social media (Järvinen et al., 2012), and a slow adoption process in general (Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides, 2011). Although some practices may be transferable from B2C firms to B2B firms, it appears much more difficult to implement and apply social media in B2B marketing (Jussila, Kärkkäinen, and Aramo-Immonen, 2014).

In general, there is limited research on social media use in B2B sales. Existing studies explore the impact of social media on the selling environment (Marshall et al., 2012), sales processes, and B2B...
sales performance (Rodriguez, Peterson, and Krishnan, 2012). The findings point to different effects for customers and sellers. From a customer perspective, social media can lead to more transparent B2B buying processes (Agnihotri et al., 2016). In particular, customers benefit from being better informed about sellers before contacting them (Giamanco and Gregoire, 2012). Sellers also gain advantages through social media (Schultz, Schwepker, and Good, 2012a), especially when generating leads and maintaining customer relationships (Giamanco and Gregoire, 2012; Lacka and Chong, 2016; Rodriguez, Peterson, and Krishnan, 2012). Nevertheless, recent research also shows that there is uncertainty about the effects of less face-to-face contact on customer relations. On the one hand, practitioners emphasize that interaction via social media is impersonal (Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides, 2011). On the other hand, less face-to-face contact is not perceived as negative per se (Marshall et al., 2012). Moreover, measuring the effect of social media marketing activities on corporate key performance indicators (KPIs) is still considered to be difficult (Järvinen et al., 2012).

2.2 Influencers

By sharing opinions, views, insights, and experiences with their network, social media users have an influence on others (Arora et al., 2019). A key assumption in interpersonal relationships is that some people are more connected to others and more influential than others (Iyengar, van den Bulte, and Valente, 2011). Those social media users who have a disproportionate large amount of influence on others are called influencers (Appel et al., 2020; Ki and Kim, 2019). Firms are increasingly focusing on these key people for marketing and sales purposes (de Veirman, Cauwergh, and Hudders, 2017) because of their strong impact on factors like purchase intention (Ki and Kim, 2019; Müller, Mattke, and Maier, 2018) or brand attitude (Mattke, Müller, and Maier, 2019).

Influencers frequently are independent third-party endorsers external to the firm “who have developed sizeable social networks by sharing details about their personal lives, experiences, and opinions publicly through texts, pictures, videos, hashtags, location check-ins, etc.” (Ki and Kim, 2019, p. 905). Influencers “combine a large audience, authority, and trustworthiness in the product category with an entertaining, interesting, and inspirational posting style.” (Babić Rosario, de Valck, and Sotgiu, 2020, p. 432) Due to their knowledge and expertise on particular topics, the social media audience attributes a high level of credibility to influencers (Ki and Kim, 2019). Other related terms include influentials (Batra and Keller, 2016; Wang, Aribarg, and Atchadé, 2019), opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Corey, 1971) or market mavens (Feick and Price, 1987; Goldenberg et al., 2009).

It is possible that corporate employees assume an influencer role as they can actively engage in conversations and create content for their firm on social networks (Huotari et al., 2015), too. The adoption of social media by employees (Andersson and Wikström, 2017; Jussila, Kärkkäinen, and Aramo-Immonen, 2014) and B2B salespersons in particular has already been studied in a few cases. However, findings show that many B2B salespersons use social media only irregularly (Bill, Feurer, and Klarmann, 2020) and that they perceive social media usefulness and ease of use as low (Siamagka et al., 2015). Schultz, Schwepker, and Good (2012b) present a profile of B2B salespersons who employ social media. Their findings reveal that those salespersons who use social media typically differ in their characteristics from sales professionals who do not use them (Schultz, Schwepker, and Good, 2012b). Agnihotri et al. (2016) report that salespersons are unsure whether social media and their overall sales strategy actually fit together.

While these studies provide some insights on the social media use of salespersons, the influencer concept has not been applied to the context of B2B sales yet. In particular, we were unable to identify empirical studies about salespersons who purposefully take on the role of a (corporate) influencer for their firms in popular professional social networks like LinkedIn.
3 Methodology

The aim of this study is to explore the role of the corporate influencer in B2B sales organizations through a qualitative-empirical interview study. We intend to provide a definition of the notion of corporate influencer that is still lacking in academic literature. Since the corporate influencer role is not well understood yet, we argue that a qualitative study, which follows the explorative approach of the grounded theory methodology (Gioia et al., 1994; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Wiesche et al., 2017), is an appropriate research strategy.

We conducted in-depth interviews with experts from which we expected relevant and plentiful data as well as a broad range of perspectives on the subject of our study (Yin, 2016). During data collection, we therefore followed a purposive sampling approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2016). Specifically, we searched for experts who work in the sales organization or a related function of a B2B firm and who actively engage on the professional social media platform LinkedIn. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend real life immersion of researchers in the field to be researched, we searched the popular professional social network LinkedIn for relevant profiles. This way, we were able to successfully approach ten experts from five firms located in Germany, who reported on their enactment of the corporate influencer role. We collected qualitative interview data through semi-structured interviews via phone, video conference and face-to-face meetings from March to July 2020. The duration of each interview was between 45 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The experts represent firms from various industries. As we guaranteed anonymity to all experts, we only provide their position and the organization’s industry in this article (Table 1).

During the interviews, we followed a semi-structured guideline with the following five sections: (1) personal data of the expert (age, position, industry, experience), (2) her/his private social media use, (3) her/his firms’ social media use/strategy, (4) the expert’s social media use for business purposes, and (5) future developments, potentials and risks of social media, especially regarding the use of LinkedIn in B2B sales as perceived by the experts. This guideline provided a basic orientation for the interview while also leaving enough flexibility for additional insights and thoughts from the experts. We refrained from providing predefined conceptualizations of the corporate influencer role in order not to bias the experts’ perspectives (Gioia et al., 1994). Our rationale was to stimulate the experts to provide rich information on their personal view and enactment of this role.

During data analysis, we followed an inductive, multi-level coding process. First, we assigned open and in-vivo codes to passages that provide relevant information about the corporate influencer role using the software MAXQDA. During this open coding stage, we tried to stick closely to informant-centric terms by using in-vivo codes like „Feel an incredible need of self-expression” (#E1) (Yin,
Table 2 illustrates some original statements and corresponding in-vivo codes. In total, we assigned 731 in-vivo codes to the interview transcripts and, hence, can only provide excerpts of them throughout this paper. In a second step, we tried to make sense of the large amount of codes by seeking similarities and differences, and organizing similar codes into categories. We did this by constantly comparing the in-vivo codes and our memos across all interviews. This resulted in 21 categories. Then, following the idea of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), we grouped relevant categories into emerging dimensions. We identified connections between the different categories and further condensed them into five aggregate dimensions. This iterative coding procedure was repeated until we arrived at a stable schema of codes, categories and dimensions (Malshe and Sohi, 2009). We followed a collaborative approach to data analysis where we discussed codes among all researchers involved in order to come up with a joint interpretation of the underlying interview data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>In-vivo code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I think that everyone who is active in social media feels the incredible need of self-expression.” (#E1)</td>
<td>Feel an incredible need of self-expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A corporate influencer should have a certain flair for social media.” (#B2)</td>
<td>Have a flair for social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think you should be under 35 years old.” (#E3)</td>
<td>Under 35 years old</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Statements and in-vivo codes.

4 Preliminary Findings

Our findings from the interviews characterize the corporate influencer as an emerging phenomenon with growing relevance for B2B sales. While only two interviewees had heard of the exact term “corporate influencer” before, our results confirm that the experts are already using LinkedIn strategically. Through our data analysis, we identified five aggregate dimensions that are helpful in describing the role of a corporate influencer. These dimensions include (a) the tasks of a corporate influencer and corresponding (b) objectives, as well as the (c) characteristics, (d) skills, and further (e) requirements to become and serve as a corporate influencer. The detailed data structure including the five dimensions, corresponding categories and exemplary in-vivo codes is illustrated in Figure 1.

The tasks of a corporate influencer mainly refer to activities that can be enacted on social media platforms. Specifically, corporate influencers in sales organizations use LinkedIn to share their expert knowledge and interesting industry news for the community (content sharing). They also create and post own high-quality content. Additionally, corporate influencers interact with the community by liking and commenting on posts (interaction). Corporate influencers perform community management, address “new people beyond personal contacts” (#E2), and constantly try to enlarge their network on LinkedIn (network building). They communicate with the community, e.g., they send and answer messages and they engage actively in discussion groups (communication). It is also part of their role to show offline presence through visits of trade fairs or networking events. Experts see those tasks as a possibility “to meet on […] a personal level [before getting] down to business.” (#A1) Through all these tasks, corporate influencers follow short-term and long-term objectives. Corporate influencers try to position themselves as experts (positioning), create awareness for their firm, implement a social selling approach and generate new leads (lead generation). According to expert #A2 this social selling approach through LinkedIn makes cold calling “more convenient than over the phone”.

Our analysis points to different characteristics, skills and requirements that are perceived as necessary for a successful corporate influencer. Regarding the characteristics, the interviewees described corporate influencers as authentic (authenticity) and extroverted in a sense of being ready to expose his or her personal identity on social media. Additionally, they have a confident appearance and feel a constant need of self-expression (extraversion). Corporate influencers are furthermore described as open (openness), likeable (likeability), and empathetic (empathy). Being authentic and extroverted had been mentioned by all experts.
Figure 1. Data structure.
Our study also reveals skills that a corporate influencer should possess. Above all, corporate influencers need to bring creativity to the table. They need this skill for content creation to make postings look attractive. Also, corporate influencers should know how social media and especially LinkedIn work; they need to have an affinity and sense for the medium. Hence, a corporate influencer is proficient in using social media (social media proficiency). Furthermore, we find that the use of language plays a crucial role. A corporate influencer needs to be able to transfer complex content into simple and understandable messages for targeted LinkedIn followers. The content and messages should be easily consumable, the approaches should be in line with the target group and, at best, personalized. In addition to characteristics and skills, we were also able to identify further requirements that must be fulfilled by a corporate influencer. A corporate influencer is an employee of a firm and is stating its firm on his/her own LinkedIn profile (corporate employee). A corporate influencer has a respectable curriculum vitae, relevant references, and a certain standing in the firm (reputation). Although a corporate influencer does not necessarily belong to the managerial or leadership personnel of the firm, he/she is well respected in the industry for his/her expertise and expert knowledge. A corporate influencer is proficient in using social media (social media proficiency). Furthermore, we find that the use of language plays a crucial role. A corporate influencer needs to be able to transfer complex content into simple and understandable messages for targeted LinkedIn followers. The content and messages should be easily consumable, the approaches should be in line with the target group and, at best, personalized. In addition to characteristics and skills, we were also able to identify further requirements that must be fulfilled by a corporate influencer. A corporate influencer is an employee of a firm and is stating its firm on his/her own LinkedIn profile (corporate employee). A corporate influencer has a respectable curriculum vitae, relevant references, and a certain standing in the firm (reputation). Although a corporate influencer does not necessarily belong to the managerial or leadership personnel of the firm, he/she is well respected in the industry for his/her expertise and expert knowledge. A corporate influencer already has a large, but most importantly, a relevant network, that “not only consists of colleagues and friends but potential customers.” (#B3) According to some interviewees, physical appearance and age also seem to be requirements to become a corporate influencer. However, the aspects of appearance and age were not mentioned consensually.

Considering all aspects related to a corporate influencer that we identified through our interview study so far, we define this role as follows: A corporate influencer is an employed individual who is not only present, but constantly active on professional social media platforms by sharing and generating high-quality content. This content is in line with his/her expert knowledge regarding his/her professional background and of interest to his/her relevant network. Through presence, interaction and communication, a corporate influencer is continuously enlarging his/her network and outreach. He/she is authentic, extroverted, open, likeable and empathetic. In addition, a corporate influencer is characterized by specific skills such as creativity, social media proficiency and use of language. His/her goals are to generate new leads for his/her firm through a social selling approach, to help position his/her firm in (potential) customers’ minds and to create awareness for himself/herself as well as for his/her firm.

5 Discussion and Outlook

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study is one of the first to explore the role of salespersons as corporate influencers in a B2B context. Our interview study with ten experts reaffirms that salespersons already use LinkedIn or intend to adopt it for business purposes soon. Our results provide a comprehensive description of the corporate influencer role along the dimensions of tasks, objectives, characteristics, skills, and requirements. Moreover, we provide a first definition of the term corporate influencer.

Summarizing, the tasks of a corporate influencer mainly include target group oriented activities on social networks (e.g., sharing and creating content) that intend to build awareness, position her/his firm and generate leads. These results confirm the findings of existing literature where the creation of content that is interesting and valuable for target groups was found essential (Andersson and Wikström, 2017), especially when prospecting and qualifying leads or maintaining relationships (Giamanco and Gregoire, 2012; Rodriguez, Peterson, and Krishnan, 2012).

Our study provides a comprehensive description of the characteristics that are commonly expected from a corporate influencer. Those characteristics include authenticity, extraversion, openness, creativity, likeability, and empathy. In existing studies on salespersons using social media, dimensions such as age and social media usage (e.g. Bill, Feurer, and Klarmann, 2020; Schultz, Schwegler, and Good, 2012a) are investigated with no focus on corporate influencer activities. While other studies found out that social media users are typically young and have developed their skills from personal social media use (Schultz, Schwegler, and Good, 2012b), our experts do not uniformly indicate so,
and see advantages in different age groups instead. Our experts are also unanimous regarding the relevance of a corporate influencer’s physical appearance while existing literature suggests that attractiveness plays a role (Till and Busler, 1998).

Finally, we provide an empirically grounded definition of the term corporate influencer, which was lacking so far in academic literature. We are confident that this role will further gain relevance in practice and, thus, its investigation from an academic perspective will also take up momentum. With this definition, we transfer the concept of influencers into the B2B context. The term no longer only describes influencers as third-party individuals (de Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders, 2017) but also as employees of a firm.

5.2 Limitations and future research

While we are confident that we provided important insights on the concept of the corporate influencer, we still see the following limitations, which also guide our next steps for this study that is still in progress. First, our empirical insights are grounded in data from only ten expert interviews so far. Although we were able to interview experts who enact the corporate influencer role in a variety of settings, this sample can neither be considered comprehensive nor representative for B2B sales in general. Our next steps involve interviewing additional experts from other firms and industries, including those who were referred to us by the interviewees. This might lead to changes or additions to the data structure that we came up with to describe and define the corporate influencer role. Following the grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Gioia et al., 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Wiesche et al., 2017), we will repeat these steps until theoretical saturation is achieved. Second, we approached our sample of interviewees exclusively via LinkedIn. In the further course of our study, we will consider the inclusion of more social networks like Instagram, Facebook or others. Third, our conceptualizations resulted from subjective interpretations of the interview data. Although we discussed the codes, categories, and dimensions intensively with all researchers involved, other researchers might have come to different interpretations of the interview data.

Our present findings also stimulate various paths for future research beyond our specific study. First, we set our scope on corporate influencers who are employees of a firm and who enact this role through their personal social media profiles. In addition, the firm itself can also be active on social networks via a firm profile (Huotari et al., 2015). The effects of these social media activities and especially their interplay with corporate influencers should be investigated in order to understand how they can create synergies, but also how they can interfere each other if not managed reasonably.

Second, our empirical insights underline the strategic importance of social media marketing and corporate influencers in B2B settings. At the same time, we see that the corresponding activities are often not strictly managed in practice yet. Future research is therefore needed to develop approaches for managing social media marketing in a B2B context that really live up to the complexity and dynamics of this field (i.e., multiple and changing social media platforms, combination of personal and firm identities, integration with other omni-channel activities). In order to be able to develop such approaches, the many interdependencies must be understood better through additional empirical studies. For instance, these should investigate the effects of corporate influencers on lead generation and sales performance as well as the effect of continuous interactions between corporate influencers and customer representatives via social media on the supplier-customer relationship.

Finally, although we identified social media proficiency as a relevant skill of corporate influencers, we also learned from our interviewees that a lot of them use social media only for business actively (e.g., liking, commenting), while using it rather passively for private purposes (i.e., rather as observers). Future research should also investigate the reasons behind such discrepancies in user behavior.
References


