



## An Assessment of the Use of Social Media in the Industrial Distribution Business-to-Business Market Sector

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### ABSTRACT

The way B2B companies use social media continues to evolve as technology improves and as demographics continue to change. The industrial distribution market sector is no different than many other markets in that the industry continues to search for ways to reach out to both existing and new customers. The industrial distribution industry has been slow to adopt new marketing tools, relying heavily on the tried and tested model of personal selling via personal relationship. As the Millennial generation continues to enter the workforce, their consumer buying expectations are different than that of the Baby Boomer generation, and they have a higher comfort level in using new technology to enhance efficiencies at work. This study evaluated the use of social media among the top industrial distributors in the United States, and it compared that information to the top industrial manufacturers in the United States. This information was then compared to similar data from Fortune 500 companies.

*Keywords:* industrial distribution, social media, industrial marketing

### INTRODUCTION

Social media has revolutionized the way many industries and market segments share, communicate, modify, create, and discuss product content and services (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Across the entire landscape of modern society, the proliferation of social media has completely changed the way government, large and small businesses, sports teams, nonprofits, and most organizations communicate with their stakeholders (Peltola & Makinen, 2014). For example, in January, 2016, President Obama had over 6.9 million Twitter followers; NASA had nearly 15 million Twitter followers; and LeBron James, an NBA basketball player, had nearly 28 million Twitter followers.

Yet, despite the proliferation of social media in today's market and the success many companies and industries have experienced with the use

of social media in both a business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) setting, some very successful companies still do not use social media, and others do not use it either efficiently or effectively (Aichner & Jacob, 2015). Countless sales books, news articles, and other research publications promote the idea that interpersonal relationships, including face-to-face selling techniques are the most effective sales strategies in a B2B environment that involves complex negotiations, long sales cycles, and may involve many people in the process (Long, Tellefsen & Lichtenthal, 2007; Singha & Koshyb, 2011). Although the importance of interpersonal relationships is still an integral component of selling highly technical products and services in industrial markets, the limited face-to-face time sales people have with customers adds to the importance of social media in staying connected with customers (Jarvinen, Tollinen, Karjaluo, & Jayawardhena, (2012).

Fortune 500 companies have begun to understand the value of a social media presence. In 2011, nearly 83% of Fortune 500 companies were engaged in some form of social media to connect with either their customers or consumers (Naylor, Lamberton, & West, 2012). To further illustrate the importance of, and necessity for social media in B2B trade, the Millennial generation is entering the workforce at an unprecedented rate, and this technology-savvy generation is changing how business is conducted. In the B2C market, an effective social media campaign can generate positive word-of-mouth advertising, as well as create viral effects in the market (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Weinberg, & Pehlivan, 2011). The B2C market has found numerous ways to capitalize on the use of social media. Some of these include developing brands, developing new markets and customers, conducting market research, recruiting new personnel, exchanging ideas, and ultimately driving revenue growth. The use and exploitation of social media in the B2C market is staggering. In 2014 it was estimated that nearly 81% of small- to medium-sized B2C enterprises (SMEs)

used social media to drive business growth, and that over 91% plan to use it in the future (Eddy, 2014).

Even though this sort of market penetration and advertising may work effectively in a consumer market, the industrial B2B market sector is completely different; historically, it has used different marketing strategies. For example, industrial B2B companies have fewer followers on their social media sites; thus, they have less opportunity to gain word-of-mouth advertising from social media that a consumer product may get (Jarvinen et al., 2012). This idea has led many companies in the industrial market to question how social media can be used for their benefit. This problem, combined with the cost of building and maintaining social media sites has meant that many B2B companies have been slow to adopt the technology.

The B2C market has clearly capitalized on the many benefits of using social media in a marketing campaign. Research has been slower to help define how B2B companies, in specialized markets, can best use this media. Though many companies are experimenting with and learning new ways to effectively use social media, there are still many very successful industrial B2B companies who have either no or very little presence in social media. The purpose of this study was to examine how the most successful companies in the industrial distribution market segment use social media, and then to compare such companies to both the top industrial manufacturers and the Fortune 500 companies, regarding how they use social media.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study examines the use of social media in a B2B industrial distribution market. As such, it is important to understand the history of how social media has so rapidly infiltrated the business world. Further, understanding the migration of the Millennial generation to the workforce is important to fully explain the magnitude of the social media trend in the business environment.

### Social Media

Social media, as understood today, is simply a means of transmitting and/or sharing information electronically with others. The original social networking sites developed in the 1990s, such as SixDegrees, MoveOn, BlackPlanet, and others, provided a portal where people could connect

and share information via the Internet. By the early 2000s, numerous social media sites began to emerge. Many of these sites were specifically designed for people and organizations with common interests (e.g., music, sports, education, movies). This electronic communication forum was originally developed for individuals, but soon the business world took advantage of this new form of communication. A brief chronology of some of the more common social media sites (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011) follows:

**Table 2:** *Social Media Chronology of Past and Current Forums*

Year	Social Media Site	Notes
1997	SixDegrees	One of the original social media sites. Now defunct.
2001	Friendster	One of the first in the social networking space to reach over 1 million users.
2002	Skyrock/ Skyblog	Skyblog was one of the original blogging sites. Based in France, now called Skyrock
	LinkedIn	The first social media site designed for business and professional networking. In 2015, currently has over 400 million users.
2003	Myspace	From 2005 to 2008 was largest social media site. Has been in decline since.
2004	Facebook	Has over 1.2 billion active monthly users. One of the largest social media sites used by both businesses and individuals
2005	Yahoo!360	Gained a wide, global audience, but ultimately failed and closed in 2009
	YouTube	This video-sharing website has gained wide use among both business and individuals. Business has used this site to upload and share product and instructional videos

**Table 2 Continued:** *Social Media Chronology of Past and Current Forums*

2006	Twitter	Allows users to use short, 140 character messages. Has more than 500 million users.
2007	Tumblr	More of a blogging site. The use of blogging is slowly declining among business users; therefore, this site is not a common among business users.
	Glassdoor	Collects and reports company data, such as salaries and employee reviews
2010	Instagram	Provides users mobile photo sharing and video sharing capabilities.

B2B companies have become quite proficient at the use of digital marketing during the past two decades. Using digital channels, such as the internet, wireless, and mobile communications, companies have learned how to communicate and transact business with a wider range of customers. However, the lines between social media and digital media are often blurred, as the elements of social media are “increasingly integrated into the established interactive digital media environment” (Jarvinen et al., 2012). While B2B companies have become quite capable at adopting all manner of digital marketing devices, such as sales and marketing support, email and other digital commercials and newsletters, and even e-commerce, these same companies have found it difficult to transfer this success into social media. Countless B2C companies have found tremendous success using social media tools to promote either their company or products. Some of these companies include T-Mobile, Taco Bell, GoPro, Pizza Hut, JetBlue, Dunkin’ Donuts, and others. But the social media experience of these mass-market companies has not been transferred to the industrial B2B market, which generally has a more limited market.

**Millennial Generation**

According to recent population projections by the United States Census Bureau, in the United States alone the millennial generation (otherwise known as Gen Y, born between 1981-2000) reached an estimated 75.3 million people in 2014, surpassing the population

of Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964). The Gen X population (born between 1965-1980) is also expected to outnumber the Baby Boomer generation by 2028 (Fry, 2015). This change in demographics has had a significant impact on the way B2B companies conduct business. The Millennial generation has grown up in the digital age; they are accustomed to searching, sharing, and acquiring information from the Internet (Khan, 2009). Millennials are quick to research product quality, features/benefits, availability, and price of consumer products prior to purchase. As one of the largest consumer groups in the history of the United States, Millennials will have a profound impact at all levels of the business sector (Kim & Ammeter, 2008). Since technology habits developed as retail consumers (e.g., searching for pricing, product information) generally transfer to the workplace, it is reasonable to expect that the technological expertise of the Millennial generation will, in large part, determine marketing strategies for many companies (Hanford, 2005; Valentine & Powers, 2013).

Compare this information to that shown in Table 1. The most common social media sites today were developed while Millennials were still fairly young. Millennials grew up with cell phones, wireless technology, and extreme connectedness. They get their news from their phone. They shop for all manner of goods and services on the Internet. They are comfortable with sharing personal information on their blogs, on Facebook, on LinkedIn, and other social media sites. And they frequent these sites often. According to Zephoria (2016), a digital marketing consulting firm, 1.01 billion people log onto Facebook every day; there are 1.39 billion active users; the most common age demographic is ages 25-34 (29.7%); the highest traffic occurs during the middle of the week, between the hours of 1-3pm; and 50% of the 18-24 year old users check their Facebook immediately upon waking up. The numbers are staggering, and illustrate why marketing professionals continue to search for ways to tap into this tremendous marketing opportunity.

**B2B Social Media Marketing Strategies**

B2B company executives understand how powerful social media can be, yet continue to either underallocate funding (or worse to allocate nothing) to promote and develop social media strategies within the company (Kietzmann et al., 2011). This lack

of foresight may be due, in part, to a lack of understanding about what social media is, how it can be implemented, and what it can do for the company (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Ideas and strategies have been developed and proposed for company executives to understand and implement an effective social media policy (Kietzmann et al., 2011), and even though it is beyond the scope of this study to drill down into the different models developed, numerous authors and researchers have developed thorough social media return on investment (ROI) financial models (see Blanchard, 2011; Powell, Groves, & Dimos, 2011). Yet, despite the research, despite the success that many of the aforementioned B2C companies have experienced with social media, other companies in the industrial B2B market sector continue either to not use social media at all, or use it marginally.

Cardon and Marshall (2015) describe social media business enthusiasts as those who “emphasize that enterprise social media represent a new way of communicating and collaborating that is more interactive and bottom-up.” Millennials understand social media as a way of communicating and learning effectively; it is almost a way of life for the Millennial generation. This constant interface with social media can be a phenomenal marketing tool, and social media business enthusiasts try to capitalize on this tool. But many in the Baby Boomer generation are more social media realists, viewing new technology on a risk vs. reward basis. For many of these executives, many of whom are of the Baby Boomer generation, the benefits of using social media do not outweigh the cost and other risks.

This study seeks to analyze the use of social media in the industrial distribution market sector, as compared to the industrial manufacturing market and the Fortune 500 companies. The purpose was to (a) determine if companies have a social media presence located directly on their web page, (b) determine if the social media sites on these company web sites are active or inactive, and (c) to compare the MDM Industrial Distribution Top 40 companies to the Industry Week Top 50 industrial manufacturers, and then to compare both of these to the Fortune 500 list of companies.

## METHODOLOGY

The leading independent research agency in industrial distribution is Modern Distribution Management (MDM). Each year MDM surveys company officials and ranks the leading industrial distributors in 15 different industrial distribution market sectors, as well as the top 40 overall. This study uses the publicly available MDM data to analyze the use of social media by these top industrial distributors (MDM, 2015). In a similar survey, Industry Week publishes a list of the top 50 manufacturers in the United States. The current study evaluated the top 40 distributors (as rated by MDM), and then the top 40 manufacturers as identified by Industry Week’s 2015 Top 50 Best Manufacturers (Industry Week, 2015), as well as the Fortune 500 list of companies.

Many of the companies represented on the MDM list are publicly traded, allowing for the collection of financial and employee information. Other companies on the MDM list are privately held, making the collection of financial and employee information difficult to obtain. All companies on the Industry Week list are public manufacturers. For each company represented, annual sales and the number of overall employees was determined. These numbers provided a good gauge regarding the size and breadth of each company. For example, some of the listed distribution companies are smaller, regional companies. A small component of the research was to ascertain if such smaller companies had a more aggressive social media campaign than did the larger companies.

Once annual sales and employee information were collected, social media information was collected from the primary website of each company. The social media sites used to gauge the companies’ usage and activity were Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. If the company had any of these social media sites listed on their primary web page, each social media site was viewed to determine if the company was active, or inactive, with the site. To be an active social media user, the authors determined that there must be new content on the site within the previous seven days, with a consistent stream of new content posted on the site.

## The companies analyzed in the Top 40 list of Industrial Distributors includes (MDM, 2015):

1	Wolseley Industrial Group	21	Bearing Distributors In.
2	W.W. Grainger	22	The United Distribution Group
3	HD Supply	23	Global Industrial
4	Airgas	24	SunSource
5	MRC Global Corporation	25	Turtle & Hughes
6	Motion Industries	26	Wajax Industrial Components
7	The Fastenal Company	27	BlackHawk Industrial
8	DistributionNOW	28	SBP Holdings Inc.
9	Sonepar Industrial	29	AWC Inc.
10	MSC Industrial Supply	30	Gas and Supply Co.
11	Applied Industrial Technologies	31	DGI Supply
12	WinWholesale Inc.	32	FCX Performance
13	McMaster-Carr	33	RS Hughes Co.
14	Edgen Group	34	Lawson Products
15	Wurth – Americas	35	Hisco
16	Interline Brands	36	Ryan Herco Flow Solutions
17	DXP Enterprises	37	Hydradyne
18	Kaman Industrial Technologies	38	OTP Industrial Solutions
19	ERIKS North America	39	Kimball Midwest
20	F.W. Webb	40	Womack Machine Supply

## RESULTS

The findings of the research are shown next. First, the results of the industrial distribution companies are shown, second, the industrial manufacturer and Fortune 500 data are shown, and finally the data from each is compared.

### Industrial Distributors

Of the top 40 industrial distributors analyzed, 24 (or 75%) had some form of social media presence on their primary, or home web site. Of these 24 companies, only 17 (43%) had a presence on all three sites; Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Further, of these companies with

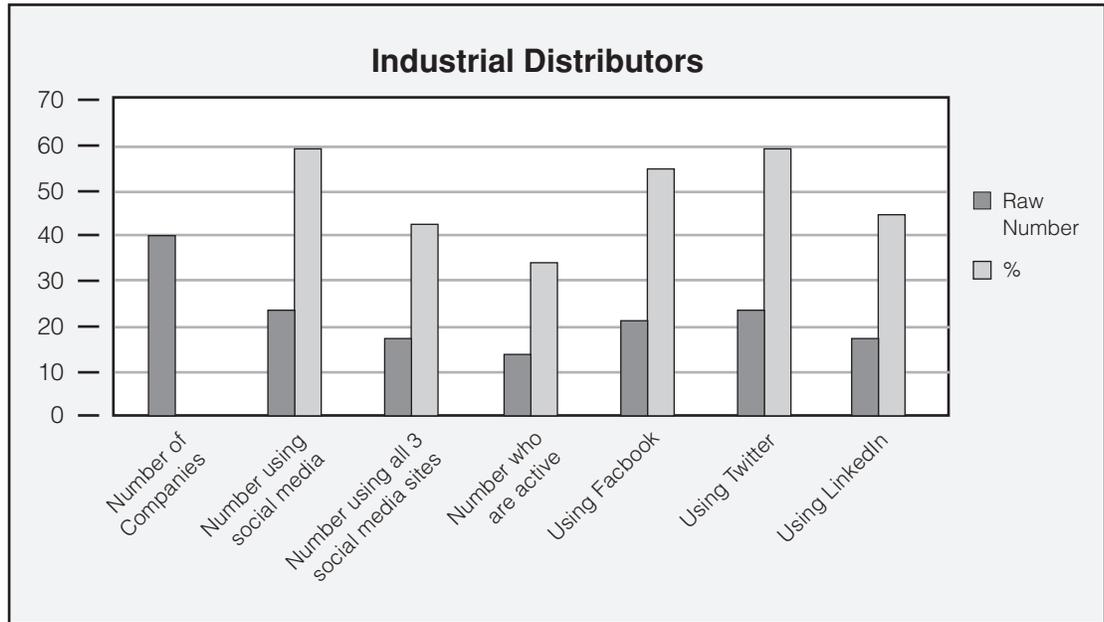
some sort of social media presence, only 14 (35%) of them were active social media users (as defined earlier); the rest of the companies had varying levels of activity, ranging from the most recent update of three weeks to over three years. Those companies who are active on social media show varying levels of marketing-related material listed on their social media sites. This suggests that 25% of the top industrial distributors did not have any social media presence, and a total of 55% of the top distributors in the country do not actively engage in updating their social media sites.

The companies analyzed in the Top 50 of Industry Week's 2015 Top 50 Best Manufacturers includes (Industry Week, 2015):

1	Polaris Industries Inc.	26	Colgate-Palmolive Co.
2	Apple Inc.	27	FMC Technologies Inc.
3	Northern Tier Energy LP	28	Rockwell Automation Inc.
4	Monster Beverage Corp.	29	Coach Inc.
5	Deluxe Corp.	30	Gentex Corp.
6	Western Refining Inc.	31	Mead Johnson Nutrition Co.
7	Sanderson Farms Inc.	32	Altria Group Inc.
8	Hershey Co.	33	Hormel Foods Corp.
9	Sherwin-Williams Co.	34	IBM Corp.
10	Toro Co.	35	Estee Lauder Cos. Inc.
11	Microsoft Corp.	36	Cummins Inc.
12	NewMarket Corp.	37	Oracle Corp.
13	Oasis Petroleum Inc.	38	Renewable Energy Group Inc.
14	Pilgrim's Pride Corp.	39	Gilead Sciences Inc.
15	Westlake Chemical Corp.	40	Western Digital Corp.
16	Qualcomm Inc.	41	Borg Warner Inc.
17	Packaging Corp. of America	42	Keurig Green Mountain, Inc.
18	IDEXX Laboratories Inc.	43	Wabtec Corp.
19	Fossil Group Inc.	44	Lockheed Martin Corp.
20	Thor Industries Inc.	45	Skyworks Solutions Inc.
21	Mettler-Toledo International, Inc.	46	Wabash National Corp.
22	Nike Inc.	47	Linear Technology Corp.
23	Alon USA Partners LP	48	Middleby Corp.
24	Lear Corp.	49	Nordson Corp.
25	Donaldson Co. Inc.	50	Marathon Petroleum Corp

The ranking of the Top 40 Industrial Distributors by MDM (2015) was by annual sales volume; Wolsley Industrial Group, with an annual sales of \$11.9 billion, was in the top position, and Womack Machine Supply, with annual sales of \$185.1 million, was in the last position. Number of employees is representative of associated annual sales: Wolsley with 22,810 employees and Womack with 290 employees.

Despite the wide variance in annual sales and employee count, neither sales nor employee count seemed to have an impact on whether an industrial distribution company had a social media presence, and if the company did have a social media presence if the site was current and active. Figure 1 illustrates both the number of companies, and percentages of companies who use Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn.



**Figure 1.** Top 40 Industrial Distributors Use of Social Media (MDM, 2015)

**Industrial Manufacturers**

Although the companies listed in the Industry Week Top 50 represent a wide cross-section of industries, from sporting goods to pharmaceuticals to industrial products and others, the list is representative of what manufacturers think about the use of social media.

Results, as shown in Figure 2, for the top industrial manufacturers were slightly different than that of industrial distributors. The data revealed that 33 (or 66%) of the top manufacturers have a link to social media on their home web page. Of these, only 16 (or 32% overall) had links to all three of the social media sites, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. The companies with a social media presence, even if it was only with one or two of the subject social media sites, seemed to be quite active with keeping their site current: 31 (or 62%, overall; 94% of all the social media users) of the manufacturers who had a social media presence

had been actively engaged in updating their social media sites within the past seven days.

Each year Fortune magazine identifies the 500 largest corporations in America, referred to as the Fortune 500. Because of the influence of these Fortune 500 companies, a number of studies have examined the use of social media by them. It is interesting to note that in 2015, nine Fortune 500 companies did not use any form of social media. Figure 3 illustrates that Twitter is more popular than Facebook among these Fortune 500 companies by a measure of 78% to 74%, Glassdoor is rapidly becoming nearly as popular as LinkedIn as a business tool (87% usage vs. 93%), corporate blogs continue to decrease, and Instagram is becoming increasingly popular among business users (Barnes, Lescault, & Holmes, 2015). This data seems to corroborate what was found with the Industry Week Top 50 industrial manufacturers.

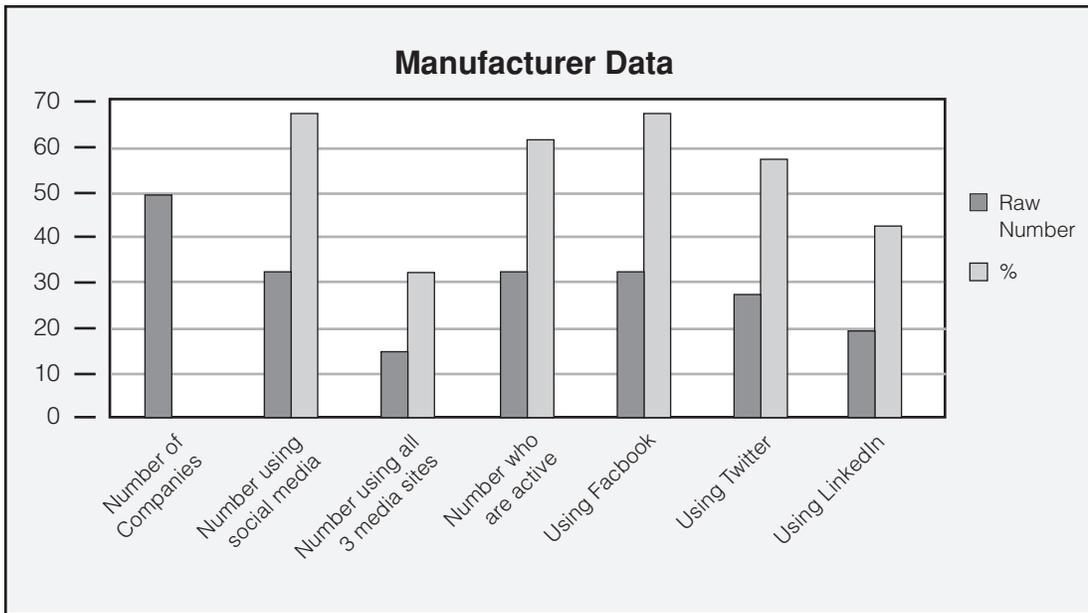


Figure 2. Top 50 Manufacturer’s Use of Social Media (Industry Week, 2015)

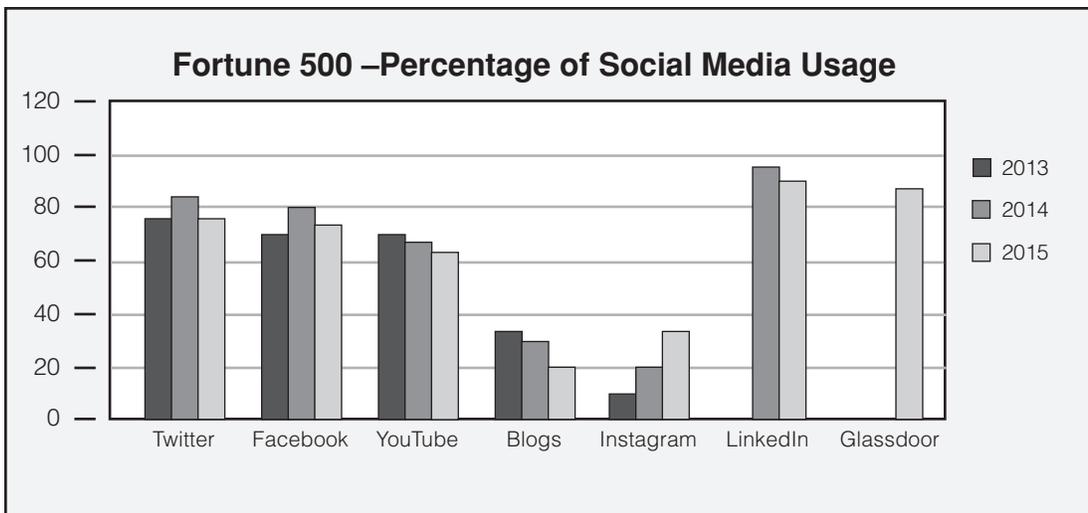


Figure 3. Fortune 500 Corporate Social Media Usage (Barnes et al., 2015)

**CONCLUSION**

It is interesting that some believe the fastest way to grow a company in the 21st century is through social media (Edosomwan, Kalangot-Prakashan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). Although it is clear that B2C companies have learned how to capitalize on the marketing opportunities that social media offers, it is less clear about the value of social media in an industrial setting where the overall market is much smaller.

There are other many circumstances that dictate whether a company engages in social media as a form of customer contact, marketing, or other sales

strategy. For example, for a company that sells a very complex, engineered product, having a social media presence may not be necessary. Similarly, for a company that sells either custom systems or automation solutions, it may be difficult to precisely articulate the need for social media. Face-to-face, interpersonal relationships with the customer in these cases may be the best way to communicate regarding products or services to these customers. In contrast, a company whose products are commoditized, with a larger potential market, social media may be a cost effective way to communicate with the global market.

Another important factor may be tradition and firm size. In a study of industrial firms, Jarvinen et al. (2012) found that long-standing digital marketing tools such as emails, digital news letters, and other forms of digital marketing are perceived to be more effective than social media tools. Although this same study by Jarvinen et al. (2012) found that social media was more important to larger companies than to small to medium-sized firms, the data reviewed in this study did not seem to support this notion. Social media was used across all sizes of companies in the top 40 industrial distributors.

This sort of data, though interesting to highlight trends, is certainly not causal. Companies shown in all Figures 1-3 are highly successful in their markets. Some choose to use social media as a means to showcase products, services, opportunities, and other news associated with their respective company, while others choose not to participate in social media; yet, are highly successful. There may be some wisdom in not participating in social media if upper management is not committed to the process of keeping content current. For example, as Edosomwan et al. (2011) stated, social media is meant for conversation and information. If customers who actively use social media believe that they can get the current, up-to-date news about products, features, sales, and other information about a company and its products using social media, they may be very disappointed if that particular social media site is not maintained and kept current. Clearly, it takes commitment from corporate administration to provide the sort of financial and personnel resources necessary to keep all forms of social media current. Social media is a cost effective method of marketing a companies' brand (Paridon & Carraher, 2009), but the company must dedicate resources to keep sites current and to respond to customers' responses. If the commitment is not there, it just may be better to not use social media at all.

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