Learning by Blogging:
Understanding Salespeople's Learning Experiences on Social Media

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Abstract

We examined 200 salespeople's blogs using netnography method. Drawing on social learning theory and real salespeople's blogs, we illustrate how and why sales people can learn by using blogging, both reading and writing. For example, blogging, writing and reading blogs, can keep salespeople networked with their peers within and across industries and help salespeople learn a greater variety of things from their peers. Our findings illustrate that writing and reading blogs can be a helpful learning tool for many salespeople. Our findings also suggest that companies should not ignore blogging as a sales training tool. In addition, Information Systems and Sales should not ignore netnography as a research method. We conclude our paper with avenues for future research.

1. Introduction

The advent of social media has led to the development and evolution of web-based communities, hosted services, and web applications such as social-networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, and blogs (22). The fact that these tools have influenced social consciousness should be surprising neither to social scientists nor to those who design, build or fund the technological worlds in which humans find themselves (24). Consumer or end-user generated media, such as personal and corporate blogs[1], play an outstanding tool for not only social networking, but also as an effective interactive communication medium in the realm of business.

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[1] *A blog is a corporate or personal online journal with reflections, expressions, comments, and hyperlinks provided by the writers to comments on specific postings (3). A blog is a more dynamic version of a personal website. Content creators, or bloggers, are able to publish and update their postings on a daily or even hourly and the internet allows the blogger to share his writings globally (3).

At the same time, the sales profession has changed dramatically; today's salespeople are value-creating knowledge workers, much like architects, who operate within unique contexts of value-creating exchanges with their customers (6). One of the bloggers we studied summarizes this as follows: "*This whole social media phenomenon is starting to change the rules for salespeople. The primary value in a salesperson is their connections.*"

There are a myriad of ways that salespeople and businesses overall are using social media (9). Salespeople are developing new modes of engagement with their peers, as well as customers, which challenges the traditional learning experiences obtained through sales training workshops, however, the researchers have yet not examined on the implications social media use in sales or sales training (14). To our knowledge, the only study that focuses on social media and salespeople is a study conducted by a consulting company OgilvyOne. In 2010, OgilvyOne researched the use of social in sales among 1,000 sales professionals in the United States, United Kingdom, Brazil, and China (8).

The OgilvyOne's study shows that many U.S. companies claim to have a social media strategy, but only 9% of U.S. salespeople say their company trains them on the use of social media for sales whereas over 25% of salespeople surveyed in Brazil receive training on social media usage. In China, 38% of the salespeople surveyed use personal blogs in their selling process whereas only 3% of U.S. salespeople do the same. OgilvyOne's study also discovered that 68% of sales professionals state they believed that the selling process is changing faster than their own organizations are adapting to it (8). Many companies, especially in the United States, are not providing solid training in social media to their sales people (8). The OgilvyOne's study also finds that nearly half of sales professionals surveyed believe their companies are afraid of letting employees use social media. Indeed, many companies are actively discouraging the use of social media, despite the fact that salespeople find the media helpful and customers are using it (4; 21). Therefore, there is a need for more research on the impact of social media on

salespeople's career development (e.g., skills), attitudes, performance, and overall learning.

Our study aims at filling the gap by focusing on exploring how salespeople learn through blogs – either by creating or consuming them. Our study focuses on private blogs. Private or personal blogs do not often have organizationally mandated communicative goals. In a personal blog, interaction is relatively unconstrained because the blog construction and maintenance is more intermittent and individual.

The objectives of our study are three-fold. First, our study explores the use of blogging by salespeople as a learning tool and the influence of sales-related blogs on the salespeople who read them. Second, this study applies the social learning theory to online learning. Third, as one of the few qualitative research studies employing the netnographic method to examine the online learning experience, our research validates the use of netnography in both Sales Management and Information Systems fields and provides insights on the netnographic method beyond its current usage.

This paper continues as follows. The next section introduces the methodology. The subsequent section is a theoretical foundation used in this study. The fourth section is the presentation of the findings. The last section is a discussion of theoretical managerial implications and suggested avenues for future research.

2. Methods
2.1 Netnography

Our study employs netnography, an Internet-based ethnographic method, created specifically to investigate human behavior of cultures and communities present on the Internet (10;11). As Kozinets (11) explains, netnography is a "written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from on-line, computer mediated, or Internet-based communications, where both the field work and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology" (p. 62). The growth in online qualitative research has given prominence to netnography, and the technique is widely used in online consumer behavior research (e.g., 5; 11; 13) and studies of online marketing. To our knowledge, netnography has, not been used in the fields of sales management or Information Systems.

The netnographic method is "faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews" (11). Several scholars consider the validity of netnographic data as equal to other types of qualitative data such as ethnographic enquiry (e.g.,7; 16;

23). We argue that netnography is a suitable research tool for researchers who are interested in capturing and critically examining the learning occurring in informal sites of social media, especially in personal blogs. Netnography differs from traditional ethnography in that the researcher can choose to follow and observe the blog but not intrude on the personal activities of the owner of the blog. Moreover, the netnography method enabled us to gain deeper insights into blogger's opinions, motives, and concerns unobtrusively and surreptitiously. Blogs provide a one- to-many means of communication that is more accessible than previous media forms, and as such, scholars can study personal blogs from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Researchers suggest that netnographic research involves an immersive combination of participation and observation (11).

2.2. Data collection and Analysis

Our interest was in exploring how salespeople learned, how they communicated amongst themselves, and what the acquired outcomes are in the context of blogging. Therefore, we used a non-participant netnographic technique to study the phenomenon without directly interacting with the bloggers (5).

Our data collection continued over a period of eight months. First, we identified suitable blogs for our study. To maximize the research goals, all types of private blogs by salespeople were considered, including micro blogs (i.e., Twitter) and regular blogs. We discovered hundreds of sales people's blogs through Yahoo.com and Google.com by using keywords such as "blog", "salespeople", and "sales profession". We instilled three main criteria to find applicable blogs: 1) the blog language had to be English, 2) the blog had to be open to the public, and 3) the blogs had to include the writer's sales experience and other job-related information. Three hundred personal blogs by salespeople qualified according to these criteria. We contacted the bloggers individually and asked their permission to use their content for our study.

Second, we eliminated approximately 100 of the blogs collected because either the content was less relevant for our study, or the owners used them mainly for commercial purposes. The final data consists of 200 personal blogs with each blog containing 100 to 1000 words. The total data collected contained around 50,000 words, or 800 double-spaced pages.

2.3. Data Analysis

In the data analysis, we followed the netnographic methods by Muñiz and Schau (18) and ethnographic conventions by Wallendorf and Belk's (23). We moved continuously between blogs and field notes. The data was read seven times and analyzed using

the constant comparative method, categorization, abstraction, and the holistic search for unifying themes. Three MBA students performed "member checks" and these checks proved helpful in the revision of the text (16; 23) and we spent over 600 hours on data analysis.

Analytic techniques consisted of summary description, pattern coding, category formation and reformation, and derivation and interpretation of themes. The analysis and interpretation of the blogs progressed in an iterative and interrelated manner until such a point where we had full confidence in our ability to interpret the overall phenomenon. The iterative process included the identification of recurring themes and motifs and, as a result, we were able to produce a thick description of the salespeople's learning process. Simultaneously, we tracked and downloaded additional blogs and looked for counterexamples to challenge the analyses.

After we documented the preliminary findings from the blogs, we recruited nine salespeople with an average of eight years of work experience, to read the findings and provide comments. They were given a week to read a complete copy of the unedited text. Six of them returned comments. The comments were favorable, and supported the contention that the netnography was an "accurate and fair" portrayal of salespeople's use of personal blogs. Among the additional comments were some that noted the presence of different opinions on personal blogs within the community of salespeople, and the practice of using social media in their daily work. Other comments noted the importance of the relationship between the salespeople and the customers built and maintained through blogs. After this process, we categorized our findings using social learning theory.

2. Social Learning Theory and Learning Online Context

Social learning theory states that people learn within a social context. Social learning theory allows scholars to define us humans by our ability to organize, regulate, and enact behaviors that we believe will produce desirable consequences (2). Individuals learn many skills from one another through interpersonal communications. A person's motivation to learn proactively from important social referents and his environment determine learning behavior (12). The critical claim of social learning theory is that individuals need not experience the consequences of their behavior directly for learning to occur (2). This idea fits in the online learning experience, in the context of our study. Many salespeople read of their peers' experiences through private and corporate blogs and, consequently, it can shape the reader's attitudes and behavior. As a

distinctive form of interpersonal interaction, personal blogging involves the sharing of potentially important professional information. Additionally, bloggers interact with their readers in a variety of ways, allowing the reader to learn job-related and life-related skills from their peers.

One key difference between learning through blogs rather than by face-to-face communication is that the blogger does not typically provide information for a specific reader or purpose, and the information is thus seen by the sales person as being more reliable. Furthermore, the sales person learns from blogs at his own pace. As Rhoton (20) states "learning about anything today is no longer episodic, but a continuous process."

Social learning theory suggests that people acquire information through both reinforcement and vicarious learning. These cognitive processes play an integral part of behavioral change. In particular, social learning theory strongly emphasizes the role of vicarious experience. According to Manz and Sims (17), vicarious learning includes "attentional, retention, motor reproduction, and motivational processes. They further state, "if any of the processes is lacking or impaired, the learner is less likely to perform an observed behavior" (p. 105). And while reinforcement aids learning, people do learn in the absence of reinforcement and even the absence of a response, particularly in the online context.

Modeling is a type of vicarious learning that plays a prominent role in social learning theory (17). Modeling, mainly through observations, is not only simple imitation of social referents, but also involves adding and subtracting from observed behavior. Generally, modeling occurs in the three circumstances: (1) when the observed people are high-status or successful people; (2) when people believe they lack skill but the observed model demonstrate the skills; (3) when people see that the models' behaviors are rewarding to the models.

Sales researchers have previously used social cognitive theory, an extension of social learning theory, to study salespeople (15; 19). Previous research has consistently found that feedback is a critical component of successful learning. In addition, the reinforcing properties of feedback can influence one's behavior without necessarily contributing to his cognitive learning (1). Managers need to use modeling effectively to enhance the sales person's achievement of organizational and personal goals (17). By motivating salespeople to observe the accomplishments of others and to attend the consequences of their own actions, firms can help sales persons to learn about the components involved in performing and to learn of the likely consequences of undesirable behaviors. As Bandura (2) points out, the ability of individuals to learn

by observing others enables them to avoid needless and often costly errors. Moreover, when the individual observes a social referent experiencing fear or negative consequences from a given stimulus, then the observer may also develop fear of the stimulus (2). Furthermore, researchers have found that observers can often learn the task faster than the actual performers because of the performers need to devote at least some attention to performing the required responses (2).

4. Findings

4.1. Blogs as a Learning Tool

The first objective of this study is to explore the use of blogging by salespeople. Job training has changed over the last two decades with online learning and social media. There is an interaction among sales people through social media for knowledge, skills, attitudes, and keys to success. As sales bloggers repeatedly remind their readers, salespeople must use social media in their work. Moreover, these bloggers point out that the Internet and social media have changed the buying process, therefore forcing the selling process to adapt. For instance, one blogger states "*this whole social media phenomenon is starting to change the rules for salespeople. The primary value in a salesperson is their connections.*"

One sales manager adds*:*

"*So when hiring account managers, you must learn to hire salespeople that understand how to generate leads in addition to prospecting. You need to hire people who are proactive in establishing an online presence, skilled in identifying likely prospects from online customers that is picked up through monitoring the conversations taking place on twitter. Using RSS aggregation from your social networks and blog comments to monitor information about your prospects communities, and most of all, establishing trust with a client before they ever meet them*".

Salespeople can observe and learn from other people through blogging (or twitter) as one of the salespeople indicates,

"*Firstly, I have spent most of the month observing other marketers, sales people, and entrepreneurs on twitter to see how they are using the tool to enhance sales, marketing, and branding. The real power of this is the brevity of the message. You have to get really good at writing headlines if you want to attract attention, and generate dialogue.*"

Another bloggers reminds, "*The conversation needs to add value, entertain, inform, and be about more than just you, people tend to follow you.*" Another salesperson writes that,

"*The social media mindset means truly embracing the notion that your customers are worth listening to, that they are worthy co-creators (the two-way thing again) and that they may in fact trust and influence each other more than you can influence them.*"

Some salespeople share their insights and specific skills on blogs. One salesperson shared what language salespeople should not use. I was taught that a salesperson should not say "but" and "however". The reason is both of them are setting the person for a negative. The advice was found to be useful and one of the reader's wrote:

"*Thank you for the insight...all of us take (sic) words for granted yet they can have an enormous powerful effect. Love it. Thank you and God bless.*"

One salesperson explains in more detail how to track customers on Twitter in blogs and many readers found these tips to be very helpful:

"*Create filters on twitter about products, needs, trends, competitors and or customers by simply looking at their status updates and recording the prospects' needs, behavior, and wants (sic). The more information you have about a customer the easier it is to make a lasting and powerful relationship with them.*

4.2 Modeling Processes and Effects and Learning through Blogs

The second objective of our study is draw on the social learning theory to categorize a learning process through blogging. Social learning theory allows us to categorize the learning process result for sales blogging into three areas (17), 1) new behavior learning effect, 2) disinhibited behavior effect, and 3) behavioral facilitation effect. By modeling other salespeople through blogging, the observer effectively enhances his self-efficacy and his confidence in the job performance. Our findings support our contention that the learning effects are significant among those who use blogs.

Overall, salespeople find the information from blogs very helpful to their work. One writer emphasizes the genuineness of the blogs:

"In this day and age where advertising saturate our lives, we question the credibility of promoters (sic) claims. However, in blogs, real people share their real-life experiences, unscathed by paid advertising. Reading blogs about first-hand product use is like talking to people about their first-hand experience. You definitely want to buy a tried and tested product."

Another blogger points out the importance of participation and listening online as follows:

"Blogging also puts you in touch with the very people who have firsthand knowledge. Yes, some of them are the subject matter experts, but often the comments yield more about the matter than the post itself. I see the initial post as the catalyst to the true exchange of useful information. Again, we must be willing to participate and listen carefully."

Learning about the customers is crucial in any sales position. One blogger uses social networking sites for listening and learning about the companies and its decision makers to whom he sells. Some salespeople do not realize the power of social networks until they begin to use blogs. The following messages from salesperson's blogs are representative of how blogs and social media can bring positive impact on the observer's work:

"The most powerful form of spreading a message is word of mouth. Social media is the manifestation of word of mouth in a visual way. You can't see word of has become this visual word of mouth we could not see before. By teaching people about how to use these tools and at the same time providing your support, people will spread the message virally. A blog is probably the best tool for harnessing and beginning this strategy. Your blog will be the central point for all your customers to come meet you and learn about what you do. From their (sic) they have the power to tell others or not."

Two bloggers illustrate the importance of social media as follows:

"If you're a car salesperson, you need Social Media. You need an online network just like you do your customer list. You need referrals through word-of-mouth because you know those relationships are the most profitable. Getting started may seem overwhelming because you most likely view Facebook as something your ―kids do for fun. Well, it's a lot more than that–you can generate leads online. That's right: You can sell cars on Social Media!

There's an enormous power to connections. Connections have the power to transfer trust to the buyer. Your job as a salesperson becomes so much easier when you have a referral. Therefore, in the long haul, salespeople with a strong network will have a huge advantage over their competitors."

Bloggers share a great deal of information on how to understand customers and provide better services. We found that salespeople post what they have learned about their customers, for instance, how customer use social media and the resulting changes in purchasing behavior. The following blog posts show how salespeople obtain new knowledge about their customers:

"With the rise of the Internet, we have seen a significant transference in power: from seller to buyer. Now, when a potential buyer is researching a product or service, they can find most of the information they need at their fingertips – on the Web." Another blogger writes: *"Customers are becoming more involved in online communities, blogs, forums, and social networks to gather information and make buying decisions. They are using social media to build up independent knowledge, and compare and contrast information and opinions."*

"When buyers download your white paper, view your data sheet and watch your flash demo, they are just feeding their research process. Don't expect to reach them by phone yet. If you're lucky, they might watch a WebEx demo. Did they ask for a price quote? They are probably ball parking their budget. They'll get in touch when you've made the short list and they have really detailed questions".

Many observers find other salespeople's blog messages inspiring and helpful in their work. In addition, these blog postings show the interaction that salespeople have with each other through various blogs. Here are some examples:

"Helpful tips! One thing I quickly learned working in sales is that you have to understand the importance of gauging your buyer and target audience, i.e., personality, receptiveness, etc. I think you covered that well in your thoughts about what to do when you hear ―no."

"Very useful as I consider our marketing plan. Many thanks for the tips and the ideas. It is a big step out for a lot of us and that we need all the assist we can get."

"I love it.........."if you put yourself down mentally, you are reducing the vitality of your system." So many great minds and with the internet there is no limit to what you can experience and learn. The battle for positive thinking is waged daily; we just forget to fight sometimes.

"What a wonderful insightful person. His advice is practical, down to earth, and so important for everyone. I love the pearls of wisdom. I think I will make post it notes and put them up everywhere."

Reading and writing blogs also motivate salespeople to change their behaviors and adapt to new sales situations. The following postings show that the salespeople have realized the impact of social media on customers and subsequently, modify their strategies: *"If potential customers are going to third party websites for information, you had better be well-represented. If your customers are on Twitter, you should be tweeting. If they are scouring the blogosphere for information, you need a blog and you need to network with other bloggers. If they search in Google – they do – you need to rank well and advertise in AdWords. Bing too.*

"This is an excellent post, we are in a transformative state, and the sooner we jump in the better for the sales team and the company. Using the tools is critical to everyone's success. The tips are great...especially including marketing, we need to better align the marketing and sales teams to drive results. And, the web conferencing makes sense, salespeople, once they see how the tools benefit them, they embrace it. Thanks for a great post. Off to sell something."

"Through tracking customer problems and issues on social media platforms, we can better understand outside perspectives and opinions our reputation lies. Just because it's on the internet and not in a mainstream publication doesn't mean damage to your reputation is avoided.

We found that salespeople use blogs to search for information, to engage in discussions, and to ask for help from other sales professionals. We observed this behavior in several of the blogs we collected. Very often, salespeople received some responses providing useful advice or new perspectives to the problems. One sales manager posted a message on his personal blog asking for advice and solutions to the "whining and complaining," from sales representatives. The sales manager exclaimed, *"I'm a sales manager, and I'm increasingly losing my patience with sales people who constantly whine and complain. Any thoughts on how to*

handle the chronic whiners?" Soon, the responses came in and the following excerpt suggests a different perspective to the problems. A fellow sales manager wrote, *"I'm going to tell you something you don't want to hear. It is more your problem than it is his/hers… There are two ways to solve this problem: Either he/she can stop complaining, or you can stop reacting to it in the way that you have."*

4.3. Disinhibited Effect

Manz and Sims (17) suggest that a model can have either an inhibitory or a disinhibitory effect on a behavior brought about by observing the consequences of a model's behavior. If the model is reinforced, then the observer is likely to be disinihibited; if the model's behavior is punished, then the observer is likely to be inhibited. Our findings from the blogs suggest that many salespeople learn to avoid some practices that other salespeople found ineffective. Three blogs illustrate this:

"Great article. I agree with the statement made that the shift has been made between sellers and buyers. The idea of sales people hunting down customers has been declining for a while and customers do not want to be spammed and colcalled. Sales people are needed to help customers that have already identified the product/services they need move through the process. Old school sales is dead."

"GREAT insight. I've often said that sales like acting! Even if you are having a bad day, heard bad news, or disappointed in your commission cheque ... whatever the case may be.... a sales pro has to put on their "game face". I agree, people will tend to buy from those that they feel good around. Having said that, most astute buyers can distinguish among fakes ,charismatic and experts. Many short-lived salespeople result from being fakes, not being able to add value or deliver results.

"Social media sites aren't always a great way for salespeople to reach out to new contacts, but they can give you a ton of information to make your approach a lot easier."

A large number of blogs deal with how to achieve work-family balance and avoid burnout. One of the bloggers writes as follows:

Isn't it interesting - the push to make life easier/better for others is mentioned so often on this site, whether the topic is

leadership, the online world, or B2B selling. What could it mean? Hmmmm. Keeping commitments, and keeping commitments to oneself, is also 100% necessary in almost any walk of life I can think of. It's easy to say that you're pushing yourself beyond the boundaries for your job, but if you're ignoring your family or the beautiful weather to do it, are you really gaining anything? Are you going to really remain at your best? Somehow I doubt it. Excellent insights indeed."

4.4. Behavioral Facilitation Effect

Behavioral facilitation effect in learning occurs when a model acts as a cue to an observer to begin a previously learned behavior (17). A simple example of this is when the highest ranking individual in a room is sitting down (i.e., the modeled behavior) and others then imitate the behavior before the start of a meeting. We found that the behavioral facilitation effect also occurs within social media. One sales blogger posted the list of 10 things to be a successful sales person. The following examples indicate that the observers attempt the same behavior that the models perform. The examples suggest that the learning effect motivates salespeople to apply the skills learned from blogs to improve their work effectiveness. Reading blogs can easily change a salesperson's attitude and behavior towards new techniques. Particularly, when the model's actions convince the reader that the actions worked, and if the learned skills prove to be effective and helpful, then the reader will imitate the actions.

"Today, I have learned a new lesson from you. I have been only thinking that saying like this "I don't have time or I can wait for 15 minutes then I have to leave" is worst thing one does and ultimately loses a potential customer. But after reading your post I am convinced that you are right. If we are well prepared, our offering is the ultimate need of the customer, and if we are right then why to feel fear? I am with you and will try my best to communicate this great lesson to my fellows as well. Have you also written something about tools to increase sales? The window and frame example you have given is outstanding. Excellent.

"This list is classic. I have it printed out and stuffed into my business portfolio to need to develop. I love #7 and #8, because they hone in a sales person's motives-- something many people don't often consider. I also love #5, because it describes the problem-solving aspect of selling. It is the reason to

acquire knowledge and business acumen, so can draw from a large pool of material to make a split decision effectively. Great stuff"

"Excellent Post. The point you have raised in this post are not going to give you success for 2011 only, you can use these tips to get success anytime. The points I love in your post are 1) Turn failure into fertilizer. The examples you have given in this point are practical and give motivation to anyone in getting success. 2) Define success: this is again the most important thing that everyone must think and define. I love it. 3) Innovate: Definitely, the most important thing for any business. Thanks for this great post. I'll share these precious points with my fellows."

We found that in many situations that reading a personal blog prompts the reader to reflect on their weaknesses, reevaluate their skills, discover gaps in their performance, and learn of challenges they may encounter in their career, as if they were talking to the blogger face-to-face. To enhance their personal career, many readers begin to adjust their learning goals after reading other people's blogs, and practice what they have learned to improve their performance. One blogger wrote:

"From my perspective, I see a continuation of the challenges of the past few years, but also selling into a "recovering economy" will demand that sales talent must refresh their messages, refresh their minds, and offer new more creative solutions that address the 5 business challenges that every business faces. Strategic sales leadership & management must be activated to enhance the entire sales process and professional execution must be stressed at all levels to win market share."

4.5. Self-Efficacy Effect and Performance Expectancy Effect

Blogging can help salespeople to become more confident in their work. From reading a blog post, an observer seems to be encouraged by the model's behavior or achievements, and eventually set his expectations higher. Social learning theory suggests that learning or modeling can influence self-efficacy and performance expectancy (17). A model's blog can help strengthen an individual's self-efficacy expectations. For example, this salesperson finds that blogging is empowering, *"One of the most beautiful things about social media is how it empowers you — if you choose to use it — with a voice you wouldn't have had in years previous."*

Social learning theory predicts that learning from models can increase one's expectations for task performance (17). That is, by observing the consequences of a model's behavior, an observer can gain information that will help to form outcome expectancies. Our data reveals that from blogging, many salespeople are encouraged by what other people have done and become more ambitious. Many of them achieve their goals and become more confident about their abilities and skills. The following examples illustrate how these salespeople learned some skills from other more experienced bloggers that helped them gain more business:

"It's officially 30 days since my twitter experiment began. I believe in Social Networking, Social Media and tools like blogging immensely. Last month I had Stephen Jagger on my podcast show and interviewed him about blogging and twitter (twitter is often referred to as a ―microblogging tool as you can only post 140 characters at a time). I'm on Facebook, LinkedIn, have a friend feed, video blog, and even an old fashioned well optimized web 1.0 sales website that still sends me a lot of business."

4.6. Blogging and Work-related Performance Outcomes

We found that many salespeople benefit from reading other peers' blogs and the knowledge and skills they learn from blogs help their performance. Two salespeople commented on the same blog posting:

"I read every word of this well written article, although I did not understand it fully, I did get the big picture, and that was this author completely understands the art of selling and is most capable of helping others to do the same. I learned and was most impressed. Do hope that many will benefit from this article and find success in selling through the insight gained by reading this."

"Agree with Jim to an extent and only from a personal experience. I worked a commission only sales job in the past in which they encouraged us to do #6. I built up so much debt it was crazy. I think this may work for some people but not everyone. I am pretty conservative so I got overwhelmed and did exactly what Jim refers to as "working to pay tomorrow's bill". I think this can be motivational, but it depends on the person and how much you are actually overextending yourself. I think the author has a good idea with the example of buying a future trip. I do something very similar to this now. I only wished I had read this article when I

was younger and not racked up so much debt. Good read."

5. Conclusion

Our study explored how salespeople learn through blogging. We used data from 200 salespeople's personal blogs to illustrate the learning thought blogging using the social learning model. The rise of social media has changed how people communicate, thus affecting the buying process in all areas. As a result, the selling profession has also changed dramatically (e.g., 14).

Our study has two main contributions. First, for researchers interested in the use of social media to improve learning processes in different areas, our study provides a theoretical foundation for future work in areas of marketing, sales, and Information Systems. Second, as one of the few qualitative research studies employing the netnographic method in Sales Management and Information Systems, our research validates the use of netnography in both fields. Our study shows the importance and usefulness of netnography method beyond its current usage.

Our findings suggest that blogging can be an effective learning tool for salespeople and we offer a number of applications for sales managers. First, a salesperson's ability to share and glean additional sources outside of the organization enhances their professional and industry knowledge. Salespeople have a need for continuous training, and many are turning to social media for new ideas and solutions to issues that they face. It could very well be that social media is becoming a de facto frequently asked questions source for sales people. As salespeople read and write blogs out of self-motivation, blogging may actually have a greater impact on learning than mandatory corporate training offered.

The second implication is the sales person's capacity to build a professional network outside of the firm. The sales representative not only becomes a receptor of information, but can also be seen as an expert in certain areas – whether within the sales profession or within their specific industry. Usage of online social business networks in addition to blogging such as LinkedIn or XING is very popular in today's business world (26). When customers and prospects view the sales person as an industry expert, they turn to him for insight and advice. This can lead to an ongoing relationship between the sales person and the firm. This leads to a question, however, will buyers turn to the sales person rather than the selling company's customer information for information about the industry and its products/services? The future research could focus on

studying how buyers are using social media and what are their expectations of sales people's use of these tools.

Third, sales representatives can use social media for more than just information exchange; it can also be a source of control of business contacts outside the firm. The sales person can build a network of industry and sales contacts beyond the organization, giving power to the representative over his employer, as he becomes the sole connection between his company and his network. These connections position the salesperson with the ability to leverage the network for more compensation from his firm or for positions at other firms. Future research could also compare the different types of formal sales training offered at the companies, and how the use of blogging could enhance learning in formal sales training.

Fourth, there are reasons for sales management to have concerns when salespeople use social media (4). Management must consider whether blogging should occur within the structure of the firm or outside of the firm. While social media may be effective at knowledge building and networking, is it the most efficient use of the salesperson's time? How much time could be used in blogging? What information can be shared in blogs? If sales people use social media for information gathering, is the information always credible or even useful.

Our study was qualitative in nature and relied solely on secondary data from the blogs of salespeople as its information source. In addition, our data could be analyzed a number of different ways. This paper shows one way. Future research could use quantitative methods or mixed methods to study social learning model in online context. Future research could investigate whether other factors such as experience or education, moderate the effect of blogging on a learning effectiveness.

Scholars might also explore the use of blogging in sales training and also other types of training. The future research in social media and learning could also examine the factors that drive intentions to use social media at work. Recently, (26) studied the factors that drive the intention to use online social business networks by using Technology Acceptance Model. A study of Castaneda, Munoz-Leiva, and Luque (25) addressed the web acceptance model, which could be adapted to fit the context of social media, especially blogging.

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