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# Social Media and Outbound Ticket Sales

## *Examining Social Media Strategies Among Top-Performing Salespeople*

Clint Warren

### Abstract

This paper examines current implementation of social media strategies by ticket salespeople. A sample of 126 ticket sales professionals across professional, collegiate, and minor league sport responded to a survey measuring social media usage rates across a variety of platforms, social media use throughout the sales process, and sales performance. Results indicate that overall ticket salespeople are not incorporating social media into their regular sales initiatives. However, top-performing sales professionals do tend to use social media more regularly than baseline ticket sales representatives when approaching and discovering the needs of their customers. Given the rise of social media as a business-to-business communication medium, ticket sales managers should consider incorporating more training and empowering their salesforces to leverage social media to facilitate greater sales success.

**Keywords:** *Social media, ticket sales, sales performance, sales management*

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### The Rise of Social Selling

With the growing recognition of the power of social media as a communication medium for commerce, organizations have sought to incorporate social media into their relationship-building activities. Research has begun to indicate social media is an integral support dimension and key facilitator of purchase decisions (Stephen & Toubia, 2010). However, for many organizations, this means simply creating and maintaining a Facebook page, Twitter account, and/or YouTube channel to ensure the entity has a “social media presence.” An individual would be hard pressed to find a major professional sport team that does not have a variety of social media accounts across a wide array of platforms. Most frequently, these social media strategies are said to facilitate fan engagement and provide an opportunity for a team to have ongoing and dynamic communication with its fan base. Many organizations have found social media to be a useful place to respond to customers and provide service in instances of product or service failure or develop new product or service strategies using customer input (Greenberg, 2009). However, this only represents one strategy by which social media can be used as a marketing tool.

Business-to-business (B2B) sales forces have begun to realize the power of social media in driving sales by connecting with potential customers at various points throughout the sales process. In B2B sales, the ability of salespeople to leverage their personal and professional social networks has become important to sales success (Ustuner & Godes, 2006). Social media platforms provide salespeople with an enhanced reach that is trackable and allows them to be ever present in their own networks. This usage of social media goes beyond the interactions by the brand’s official social media account, which is best categorized as social media marketing. Definitions of social media view the concepts of engagement and collaboration as the key building blocks of social media (Andzulis, Panagopoulous, & Rapp, 2012). With those conceptual building blocks in mind, social selling is the engagement of and collaboration with prospects by salespeople. As professional sport teams increasingly adopt B2B sales strategies to sell season ticket plans and premium seating, it is important for these organizations to develop social media strategies that go beyond the brand having an official social media presence to social selling. The Sacramento Kings make for an interesting case study in social selling success. The Kings partnered with LinkedIn to develop a social selling strategy that fit their tech-savvy, millennial salesforce. The team trained salespeople on specific manners by which they could incorporate LinkedIn and its companion social selling technology platform, Sales Navigator, into their daily selling activities. In the first season of this partnership, the Kings saw an approximately 42% increase in the size of an average ticket account sale, and they surpassed their own in-game ticket sales goal by approximately 50% (LinkedIn, 2015).

While a realization of the power of social selling has emerged for some, many B2B salespeople have been slow to incorporate social media into their day-to-

day sales efforts. Agnihotri et al. (2012) postulate the previous failures of supposed technological enhancements to selling coupled with the fundamental belief that selling requires a person to person, “human touch” interaction has led to this trend. Additionally, there is a concern that a salesperson who is active on social media is more likely to push information toward prospects rather than create content that would pull them toward a conversation (Agnihotri et al., 2012). This is counter to the fundamental tenets of selling that rely on building trust. Further, sales managers may be reluctant to adopt and encourage a new technology that could be used to detract from selling activities and reduce sales force effort levels. “Cold calling” is a rapidly declining strategy (Ingram, 1990), but for many sales managers, a reliance on “dialing for dollars” has become a default setting for their sales strategies, because they feel salespeople need to be “on the phones.” This has led to a growing divide between sales professionals. As a result of this conflict and the emerging emphasis on social selling, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the social media usage tendencies of ticket salespeople?

RQ2: Do top-performing ticket salespeople incorporate social media into their sales efforts more regularly than other salespeople?

RQ3: Are top-performing ticket salespeople integrating social media into their sales efforts at specific points in the sales process that lead to success?

This study begins to fill a critical gap in the sport marketing literature in a series of ways. This study is the first paper to examine the implementation of social media in an outbound ticket selling context. Additionally, this paper directly compares traditional phone sales and emerging social selling. Finally, this paper draws a sharp focus on the largely neglected study of sales strategy and sales management in the sport marketing literature.

### **Sales Communication on Social Media**

Social media is altering the way businesses interact with their customers and is ushering in a new paradigm of sales communication (Rapp & Panagopolous, 2012). Social media platforms have shifted the power in buyer-seller relationships in a manner that allows the buyer to be a collaborative part of the marketing and sales process rather than an inactive component. The power of the Internet and social media platforms as marketing, communication, and sales tools has led to a significant increase in the interest in understanding how customer engagement that yields actual purchase behavior occurs for different types of consumers (Sashi, 2012). Customer engagement is defined as the process of creating experiences that allow companies to build deeper, more meaningful and sustainable relationships with its customers (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2007). Creating customer engagement is an important part of building value in the mind of a consumer in order to influence purchase behavior, develop trust, and build loyalty (Pralhad &

Ramaswamy, 2004). Customer engagement is a process that begins with connecting and interacting with a prospective buyer of a product or service. Traditional methods of connection and interaction in ticket sales are via phone call, e-mail, and face-to-face meetings. These methods represent the tried-and-true approach to using the sales process to engage customers in an attempt to persuade them to buy a ticket plan. While it is clear social media is a new form of communication that could be utilized in a similar manner as a phone call or e-mail message, it is unclear to what extent customers would accept that mode of communication to do business.

Recently, the study of the role of social media in sales settings has begun to grow. The initial thrust of this area of study is in analyzing the internal sales and marketing relationship with individual organizations and determining whether social media communication should originate from one unit, marketing, or the other, sales (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Andzulis et al. (2012) argue social media communication should be consistent with the firms overall business strategies. In other words, a business must fully articulate its goals in using social media communication and match those goals with the preferences of customers. For example, if the goal of social media communications is to engage a wide range of potential buyers, it would be more useful to allow the marketing unit to deliver these types of messages. This is a common practice in sport marketing. The Minnesota Twins used Facebook and Twitter to generate consumer word-of-mouth communication in the buildup to the 2013 baseball season via its "Opening Day Traditions" campaign (Stimson, 2012). While the University of Michigan reported it generated \$315,000 in ticket revenue by using mass social media campaigns designed to highlight last minute ticket deals (*Sports Business Journal*, 2012). The problem with using social media only as another method of traditional promotional communication is it is very difficult to connect revenue generated to the campaign. This is a common problem when evaluating advertising effectiveness. Additionally, the examples provided by the Twins and Wolverine Athletics are strategies to increase single-game ticket purchases. They do little to facilitate ticket plan purchases. In instances where an organization has determined social media should be used as a more personalized customer engagement mechanism, it is important to develop a plan for when and how customers should be engaged. This is not to suggest organizations should only use one social media strategy. Social media has the potential to facilitate fan engagement, provide service, deliver promotional messaging, and be utilized in outbound sales efforts.

### **Social Selling and the Sales Process**

Social media has the potential to affect the sales process at every step (Andzulis et al., 2012). The sales process consists of the following steps: 1) understanding the customer, 2) approaching the customer, 3) discovering customer needs, 4) presenting, 5) closing sales, and 6) following up/providing service. Social media creates extensive opportunities to engage customers at each of these six steps

(Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Rodriguez, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012). Andzulis et al. (2012) provide a series of recommendations as to how an organization can strategically integrate social selling at each step in the sales process. They recommend activities such as joining LinkedIn groups and establishing a Twitter presence as viable strategies to understand customers. Next they suggest approaching customers with activities such as posting news stories to Facebook and tweeting about innovative ideas. Soliciting feedback via Twitter and Facebook are identified as strategies to discover customer needs. Andzulis et al (2012) then indicate sharing success stories of other clients on a variety of platforms as a good way to present product information. They then indicate sending out Twitter messages or Facebook posts designed to link potential customers to buying channels can assist in closing sales, and using Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook collectively to monitor and respond to existing customers can be a valuable service tool. In sum, these suggestions are meant to highlight the ability of social media to be a customer engagement mechanism at all steps of the selling process. Subsequent research has indicated sales professionals in B2B environments are using these strategies to drive sales (Moore et al., 2015). However, when examined at each step of the sales process, it is clear salespeople are incorporating social media more regularly when attempting to understand and approach customers as well as when attempting to provide service than at the other steps in the middle of the process (Moore et al., 2015).

Social media provides customers with opportunities to interact and communicate directly with businesses (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2005; Trainor, 2012). As a result, integrating social media throughout the sales process creates a number of possibilities for engagement. However, it is unclear if spending the time to integrate social media into the day-to-day activities of salespeople yields improved performance over more traditional e-mail or telemarketing strategies. While Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, and Singh (2012) develop a framework for how customers might find value through social media interactions, and Marshall et al. (2012) found sales staffs do use social media in attempting to engage customers, no studies to date examine the effectiveness of social media selling. Further, the social media literature in sport marketing has exclusively focused on communications delivered by either the team's general account or athletes (Cornish & Larkin, 2014; Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszkas, 2013; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). As such, the purpose of this study is to examine current implementation and success of social selling strategies when compared to traditional sales techniques among ticket salespeople. Specifically, this study compares the relative effectiveness of social media and the phone throughout the sales process.

## Method

### Sample and Instrument

The population of interest for the present study was ticket salespeople working for major professional, minor league, or collegiate sport properties. Data were collected utilizing an online survey instrument that was delivered using a respondent-driven sampling technique. The survey was initially sent to 15 sales managers (five major professional, five minor professional, and five collegiate) with instructions to deliver the survey to their sales staffs and anyone else in their professional networks who might find the survey valuable. An initial attempt was made to preserve the diversity of sport levels by sharing the survey with an equal number of managers at each sport level. All salespeople who received the survey were also prompted to share the survey with anyone in their professional networks. In total, 146 salespeople took the survey, with 126 responses being deemed complete and usable. While a weakness of respondent-driven sampling is that the size of the population cannot be known (Morgan, 2008), the number of responses to this survey represents a reasonable response rate given the size of typical team and athletic department sales staffs.

Since this study is the first to analyze social media engagement throughout the sales process, a survey instrument was developed in accordance with the theoretical frameworks of sales engagement described by Andzulis et al. (2012) and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). The instrument was sent to four ticket sales professionals and two academics who study sport sales and regularly utilize survey research. Following a series of small adjustments to scale item verbiage, the final scale items and corresponding measurement constructs, represented in Table 1, were deemed appropriate for the research context. The 12 resulting measurement constructs are the independent variables of interest in this study. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted for each scale to test for internal consistency and is discussed below. CFA results are also included in Table 1.

The dependent variable in this study was sales performance. Sales performance was measured using Krishnan, Netemeyer, and Boles' (2002) three-item sales performance scale. Self-reporting of sales performance has been criticized in the sales management literature as being open to a significant degree of respondent bias (Krishnan et al., 2002). However, in instances where it is not possible to obtain actual individual salesperson revenue performance self-reported measures are deemed appropriate. In sum, participants responded to 39 Likert scale items with anchors of "*strongly agree*" and "*strongly disagree*." Each participant also responded to basic demographic and social media usage questions.

**Table 1***Ticket Selling Strategy Scale Items and Reliability*

Item	$\alpha$
<i>Understand the customer (social media)</i>	.905
1. Social media to get to know customers.	
2. Social media to understand customer needs.	
3. Social media to understand customer attitude toward buying tickets.	
<i>Understand the customer (phone)</i>	.966
1. The phone to get to know customers.	
2. The phone to understand customer needs.	
3. The phone to understand customer attitude toward buying tickets.	
<i>Approaching the customer (social media)</i>	.965
1. Social media to establish credibility with customers.	
2. Social media to gain customer attention.	
3. Social media to build rapport with customers.	
<i>Approaching the customer (phone)</i>	.945
1. The phone to establish credibility with customers.	
2. The phone to gain customer attention.	
3. The phone to build rapport with customers.	
<i>Discovering customer needs (social media)</i>	.870
1. Social media to solicit customer ideas.	
2. Social media to listen to customer feedback.	
3. Social media to discover why customers would buy tickets.	
<i>Discovering customer needs (phone)</i>	.543
1. The phone to solicit customer ideas.	
2. The phone to listen to customer feedback.	
3. The phone to discover why customers would buy tickets.	
<i>Presenting (social media)</i>	.959
1. Social media to demonstrate the value in owing tickets.	
2. Social media to prescribe solutions to customers.	
3. Social media to provide visuals of where seats will be.	
<i>Presenting (phone)</i>	.863
1. The phone to demonstrate the value in owing tickets.	
2. The phone to prescribe solutions to customers.	
3. The phone to describe where seats will be.	
<i>Closing sales (social media)</i>	.872
1. Social media to ask customers to buy tickets.	
2. Social media to respond to objections.	
3. Social media to negotiate with customers.	
<i>Closing sales (phone)</i>	.940
1. The phone to ask customers to buy tickets.	
2. The phone to respond to objections.	
3. The phone to negotiate with customers.	
<i>Following up/providing service (social media)</i>	.918
1. Social media to provide customer service.	
2. Social media to ask for referrals.	
3. Social media to communicate success stories.	
<i>Following up/providing service (phone)</i>	.934
1. The phone to provide customer service.	
2. The phone to ask for referrals.	
3. The phone to communicate success stories.	



## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in two primary phases. First, as this is the first study to examine social selling in a sport context basic frequency statistics were analyzed to assess the current state of social media usage among ticket sales people and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted that compared top-performing reps to baseline reps based on the individual's usage of specific social media platforms in selling situations. These results provide an initial insight into the prevalence of social selling in ticket sales. Second, a logistic regression equation was developed and used to predict sales performance as a function of sales strategies employed throughout the sales process. Since logistic regression is used to predict binary outcomes of a dependent variable (Hosmer, Lemeshow, & Sturdivant, 2013), the binary outcome of the dependent variable in this model is the categorization of the salesperson as either a "top performer" or "baseline salesperson." The 12 measurement constructs representing either phone or social media engagement throughout the sales process are included as the independent variables in the model. A maximum likelihood estimation was used to analyze the regression coefficient. According to Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2002), there is no generally agreed upon goodness-of-fit statistic in logistic regression; however, Hosmer et al. (2013) argue calculating a likelihood ratio  $R^2$ , such as Nagelkerke's  $R^2$  ( $NR^2$ ), is the best approach. As such, this study will follow Menard's (2002) recommendation and test for the significance of  $NR^2$  at a threshold of  $p < .05$ .

## Results

The survey was sent taken by a total of 146 salespeople with 126 responses being deemed complete and usable. The respondents consisted of 64.3% males ( $n = 81$ ) and 22.2% females ( $n = 28$ ) with 13.5% ( $n = 17$ ) preferring not to respond. Respondents were generally between the ages of 21 and 29 years old (82.5%,  $n = 104$ ). In addition, 30.2% ( $n = 38$ ) of respondents indicated they worked for a major professional team, 65.9% ( $n = 83$ ) in college athletics, and 4.0% ( $n = 5$ ) in minor league sport. Additionally, 41.3% of respondents were categorized as top performers using Krishnan et al.'s (2002) sales performance scale, while the remaining 58.7% were considered baseline salespeople. Results of the CFA indicated that all six scales representing the sales process showed an acceptable to good fit to the data and thus strong internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .543 to .966.

## General Social Media Usage

As the first study of social media usage by ticket salespeople, it is important to describe the implementation of social selling in the sport industry. Table 2 includes frequency statistics regarding the sample's activity on a variety of social media platforms and their frequency of activity on each platform in selling situations. Interestingly, 95.2% of salespeople in the sample indicated they were active on

LinkedIn ( $n = 120$ ) and 88.9% indicated they were active on Facebook ( $n = 112$ ). Google+ was by far the least popular platform on which reps are active with only 6.3% ( $n = 8$ ) of respondents indicated they were active on that platform.

**Table 2**

*Social Media Activity Among Ticket Salespeople*

Platform	Active % ( $n$ )	Inactive % ( $n$ )	Usage in Selling $M$ ( $SD$ )
LinkedIn	95.2 (120)	4.8 (6)	2.30 (1.168)
Facebook	88.9 (112)	11.1 (14)	2.12 (1.070)
Snapchat	81.7 (103)	18.3 (23)	1.27 (.652)
Instagram	74.6 (94)	25.4 (32)	1.46 (.836)
Twitter	71.4 (90)	28.6 (36)	1.95 (1.151)
Pinterest	20.6 (26)	79.4 (100)	1.06 (.245)
YouTube	34.9 (44)	65.1 (82)	1.13 (.456)
Google+	6.3 (8)	93.7 (118)	1.06 (.245)

While these data indicate the salespeople in the sample are active on social media, results also show the sample tends to rarely use social media in selling situations. In fact, LinkedIn ( $M = 2.30$ ) and Facebook ( $M = 2.12$ ) seem to be the only platforms sometimes used in selling situations. Table 2 includes results for each platform included in the survey. Additionally, results of the ANOVA between top performers and baseline reps as it related to their usage of specific social media platforms in selling situations indicated LinkedIn was the only platform on which top performers were significantly more active than baseline reps ( $p = .001$ ).

### Logistic Regression Results

A logistic regression model was developed and conducted to predict top sales performers for 126 salespeople using the implementation of social media and the phone at each step of the sales process. The full model test against a constant only model yielded statistically significant findings (chi square = 49.812,  $p < .001$ ,  $df = 12$ ). These results indicated the independent variables as a group reliably distinguish between top performers and baseline salespeople. Also, the Hosmer and Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test was not statistically significant (chi square = 11.700,  $p = .111$ ,  $df = 7$ ). This finding indicates the logistic regression model has been appropriately specified and should subsequently be accepted. Additionally, NR2(.440) indicated a moderate relationship between prediction and grouping. Overall, prediction success of the model was 73.0% (83.8% for baseline and 57.7% for top performers). The Wald criterion indicated the usage of social media at the “approach the customer” ( $p = .004$ ) and “needs discovery” ( $p = .005$ ) steps of the

sales process made significant contributions to prediction. Additionally, “presenting” a sales pitch over the phone ( $p = .020$ ) was a significant predictor of salesperson performance classification. Full results for each independent variable are included in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Logistic Regression Model of Selling Strategies by Top Performing and Baseline Salespeople*

Variable	$\beta$	SE	Wald test	p-Value
<b>Phone</b>				
Understanding the customer	8.199	5.752	2.032	.154
Approaching the customer	2.351	2.574	.834	.361
Discovering customer needs	2.555	2.860	.798	.372
Presenting	2.993	1.284	5.429	.020*
Closing sales	.456	1.220	.140	.708
Following up/providing service	-2.035	1.228	2.744	.098
<b>Social Media</b>				
Understanding the customer	.259	.611	.180	.671
Approaching the customer	1.097	.377	8.450	.004*
Discovering customer needs	2.358	.846	7.769	.005*
Presenting	.769	.508	2.289	.130
Closing sales	-.457	.550	.689	.407
Following up/providing service	.742	.474	2.450	.118

\* Indicates statistical significance at the .05 level.

## Discussion and Implications

This paper is the first empirical study of social media usage by an outbound ticket salesforce. As such, an initial assessment of social media activity by salespeople in and out of their job functions was conducted to answer RQ1. Further, two exploratory research questions were proposed: RQ2) Do top-performing ticket salespeople incorporate social media into their sales efforts more regularly than other salespeople? and RQ3), Are top-performing ticket salespeople integrating social media into their sales efforts at specific points in the sales process that lead to success? While ticket salespeople are predictably active on a variety of social media platforms, results of this study suggest top performers do integrate social media into their selling efforts more regularly than baseline salespeople. Further, it appears there are specific steps during the sales process at which point top performers tend to use social media.

### **General Social Media Usage by Ticket Salespeople**

First, results of this study indicate that the age of majority for ticket salespeople falls within the much discussed and analyzed millennial demographic. In this study, 82.5% of participants were in their 20s. Not surprisingly, the general social media usage trends among study participants were found to be consistent with popular trends in social media usage. Specifically, Facebook was found to be an incredibly popular platform on which salespeople were active (88.9%); however, it was only found to be the second most popular platform among salespeople. Interestingly, LinkedIn was cited as the most popular platform on which salespeople were active (95.2%). This is in considerable contrast to typical millennial social media activity. Additionally, the emerging prominence of Snapchat is apparent in these findings. Among salespeople, 81.7% were active on this platform. These results suggest some important considerations for sales managers. First, the popularity of LinkedIn is something that should be leveraged. While it is likely salespeople in this sample were encouraged to create accounts and become active users on LinkedIn by professional mentors, their sales managers, and/or college professors, it does not diminish the fact that salespeople are active users of the professional networking platform. Given the recent success of the Sacramento Kings in driving business with LinkedIn, sales managers should take advantage of already having a salesforce comfortable with the platform and incorporate it into sales training and strategy. Additionally, sales managers should consider finding ways to encourage the development of selling initiatives that leverage Facebook and Snapchat. Customer engagement is critical to moving an individual through the buying process and ultimately making a sale. The implementation of these platforms as engagement mechanisms for ticket salespeople appears to be underdeveloped.

### **Social Media Platforms and Ticket Selling**

Second, the findings of this paper suggest ticket salespeople in general are not regularly incorporating social media into their selling activities. When examined across social media platforms, salespeople indicated they rarely use Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, and Google+ in selling. The two most popular platforms used in selling initiatives were LinkedIn and Facebook. However, salespeople only indicated these platforms were sometimes used during their sales campaigns. This is an important finding as Moore et al. (2015) found integrating social media into outbound selling efforts of a B2B salesforce is a critical component of selling for nonsport business. Particularly, usage rates by sales managers appears to be high, as positive results are beginning to manifest for socially connected salesforces. The relative underutilization of social media by ticket salespeople who are already active users of many social platforms raises concerns of the manner by which they are developing customer relationships.

This study also provides evidence in support of the need to incorporate social media into sales training and outbound selling initiatives. Top-performing salespeople were significantly more likely to integrate social media into their jobs than baseline salespeople. Specifically, top-performing reps were using LinkedIn significantly to generate business. Once again, this finding is consistent with current sales industry trends regarding the effectiveness of this platform. Sales managers should incorporate sales training for all salespeople that leverages LinkedIn as a relationship-building platform. Additionally, sales managers should further explore the potential of other platforms, particularly Facebook and Snapchat, in B2B sales efforts.

### Social Media Implementation by Top Performers

Third, this research suggests the manner by which salespeople use the phone and social media throughout the sales process is predictive of their self-reported measure of sales success. In particular, top performers indicated significantly different selling tendencies than baseline salespeople. To reiterate, this study examined the sales process from a six-step, B2B perspective. The six steps to the process were as follows: 1) Understanding the customer, 2) approaching the customer, 3) discovering customer needs, 4) presenting, 5) closing sales, and 6) following up/providing service. Top performing salespeople indicated significantly different tendencies than baseline salespeople with respect to using social media at steps 2 and 3. These results indicate top-performing salespeople use social media to approach the customer and discover customer needs with greater regularity than their baseline counterparts. This validates the assertion that social media as a mode of communication provides extensive engagement opportunities for B2B salespeople (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2012). However, Andzulis et al. (2012) suggests social media has the potential to impact customers at all steps of the sales process. The lack of significant differences between top performers and baseline salespeople coupled with the relative lack of social media use in selling situations suggests ticket salespeople are not effectively using social media at other stages of relationship building and customer engagement.

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