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## **The Paradoxical Effects of Interactive Information Technology on Sales-Marketing Interface Communication<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction and Research Question**

One of the major findings from the literature on Sales-Marketing Interface (SMI) is that SMI communication- that is, how well sales and marketing managers are able to communicate with each other has a significant effect on the functioning of this interface (Rouziès et al., 2005). Unfortunately, in many firms, SMI communication remains suboptimal (Kotler et al. 2006).

An emergent external element- information technology-based communication tools, such as social media, texting, twittering, or mobile marketing techniques, to name a few, holds the potential to significantly affect SMI communication and its functioning. Barring the exception of Marshall et al. (2012), no scholarly research has specifically examined how these emergent technological tools may impact a crucial SMI variable.

Against this backdrop, our paper examines two research questions: (a) how may interactive technology tools affect SMI communication? and (b) what factors may enhance the positive effects of technology on SMI communication while containing its negative effects?

### **Brief Literature Review**

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Time and again, academic research and practitioner reports suggest that the working relationship between Sales and Marketing remains unsatisfactory in a majority of firms (Kotler et al., 2006). Extant scholarly research on SMI suggests that communication between sales and marketing departments may play a crucial role in forging an integrated interface (Kahn 1996; Rouziès et al., 2005), engendering stronger sales-marketing collaboration, reducing interface conflict (Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy (2007), and enhancing firm performance.

A new external element- the emergence of interactive technology and its increasing utilization in sales and marketing realms holds the potential to significantly impact SMI communication and subsequently interface dynamics.

Sales scholars have examined the effect of technology on a range of issues such as changing selling paradigm, nature of sales process, or relationship selling mechanisms (Rapp, Agnihotri, and Forbes 2008; Ahearne et al. 2008). However, barring the exception of Marshall et al. (2012), we are not aware of any academic, empirical work that has studied the effect of technology on SMI communication. Our paper is one of the very first investigations into this area.

## **Methodology**

For the initial exploratory study, we collected in-depth interview data from 8 sales and 7 marketing professionals in the US. Our informants came from a variety of industries such as healthcare, services, IT solutions, and industrial products. Their work tenure ranged from 3 to over 15 years. The average interview length was 50 minutes. Our main questions focused on the technologies informants' firms had employed in their sales and marketing activities, how they used technology, what their experiences were, and how it has affected their work. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. We verified the rigor of our data analysis by doing

member checks (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Owing to space restrictions, we simply discuss our salient findings and don't provide any informant quotes in support of our findings.

## **Findings**

Our key finding is that the effects of technology on SMI communication are *paradoxical*- that is, technology acts like a double-edged sword in SMI communication. We identify technology's positive and negative effects, as well as bring forth two boundary conditions that may moderate the relationship between technology and SMI communication.

### **Technology is a communication facilitator**

#### ***Enhanced communication speed***

We find that interactive technologies significantly enhance the SMI communication speed that allows SMI personnel to share important market feedback with each other quickly. It is thus plausible that enhanced speed of information exchange allows marketing and sales personnel to be more responsive to requests for support from the other party, thereby enhancing their effectiveness in serving customers, and engendering positive feelings for their counterparts.

#### ***Information availability***

Technology allows marketers to put relevant information up on the company intranets that salespeople can access using their mobile devices. Further, technology allows marketers a 24/7 updating capability thereby enhancing information currency, which helps salespeople with their response accuracy and timeliness. Marketers, too, benefit from timely, updated market feedback from sales personnel so that they can fine-tune their strategies.

#### ***Convenience***

Technology also makes it convenient for sales and marketing personnel to connect with one another- irrespective of where they are in the hierarchy. For example, in one single key-

stroke, a junior level marketer may reach the entire sales force with an e-mail or a text message blast. Salespeople, too, gain the ability to send feedback to marketers at any level “on the go” thus improving the connectivity and reach between the two functions.

### **Technology as a communication obstructer**

While serving as a useful tool, interactive technologies may also challenge interface communication. This attests to the paradoxical effects of technology on SMI communication. Below, we briefly discuss three ways in which technology may obstruct SMI communication.

#### ***Impersonal communication perceived as “Cold”***

A majority of our informants note that the technology-mediated communication is impersonal and hence, “cold” - lacking a personal touch. Further, over-reliance on technology as a primary communication medium robs the process of the non-verbal and intangible cues that are crucial in attaching meaning to communication. Given the sub-optimal nature of the SMI, “impersonal and cold communication” may serve as a fertile ground for distrust within the SMI.

#### ***Defiance and ignorance fueled by the sense of urgency***

24/7 connectivity engenders a perpetual sense of urgency in SMI communication and the expectation for a quick response to one’s communication has two negative implications. First, when quick response is not received, sales/marketing personnel perceive their counterpart as ignorant and careless. Second, the information receivers, facing information deluge, may become defiant and heuristically ignore the other party’s messages with the rationale that if it is really urgent, they will hear from them again. This phenomenon may trigger SMI distrust and conflict.

#### ***Technology creates a permanent record***

Our informants note that since technology-mediated communication leaves a permanent, searchable, and reproducible record of communication; there are occasions such as discussing

confidential (product data/specifications) or tentative matters (sales forecasts/ launch dates) when technology tools are not a preferred communication mechanism. Such risks do not exist while using informal hallway chats, or informal meetings to communicate with colleagues.

### **Boundary conditions**

Interface personnel must proactively devise two mechanisms that enhance interactive technology's positive effects on SMI communication and contain its undesirable effects. The first is *building inherent interface harmony*. Specifically, managers must strengthen the SMI so that it may weather technology's negative effects on SMI communication. Second, managers may devise *mutually agreed upon netiquettes* that outline expectations about how to deal with the deluge of information, and/or what is to be treated as urgent and/or non-urgent.

### **Contributions, Implications, Limitations and Future Research**

Our study makes three contributions to marketing theory. First, we address an under-examined area within the SMI domain and highlight the paradoxical nature of technology's effects on SMI communication. Second, we highlight that technology is just a tool and its pervasive use, by itself, may not necessarily improve SMI communication. To reap technology's benefits, managers must invest time and resources in building an inherently strong SMI and developing netiquettes that set communication parameters. Last, by explicating the effects of technology on SMI communication, our paper provides a starting point to understand the downstream effects of technology on other crucial interface variables such as collaboration, integration, conflict, and the overall functioning of the interface.

The key managerial takeaway from our study is technology's paradoxical nature on SMI communication. Managers must proactively anticipate technology's unintended effects and curb the same in time. They must also do everything in their capacity to enhance the positive effects.

Knowledge of SMI based boundary conditions will help managers in this regard so that they may develop systems and processes to inherently strengthen the interface.

We acknowledge that small sample size is a limitation of our study. Nonetheless, we believe that this exploratory endeavor will open up avenues for deeper research in this area. Future research may examine additional factors that may serve as facilitators, challengers, or boundary conditions for this phenomenon. One may also compare this phenomenon across industries to see if different patterns emerge.

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