

Drivers of Corporate B2B Web Sites' Effectiveness: A Comparison Between North American and European Perspective

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Extended Abstract

The globalization of economic activities has led multinational business-to-business (B2B) firms to use their corporate web sites extensively to communicate with their stakeholders. We view a B2B corporate web site as a gateway between a company and its prospects, customers, and other stakeholders. A B2B company's corporate web site is typically used to provide general information about the company, trade or application-specific information and news, and product information. This paper examines three general information-related factors that influence customers' perceptions of corporate B2B web sites' effectiveness and whether or not these factors differ for North American versus European customers.

A recent report from eMarketer (2001) projects worldwide total e-commerce to grow to \$3.2 trillion in 2004 and to be dominated by an online population outside of North America. As per some recent statistics, more than 600 million people are online worldwide and the number of European Internet users (190 million) has exceeded the number of North American Internet users (183 million). It is common knowledge that there are many underlying differences between how customers in North America perceive marketing stimuli or communication compared to customers in other parts of the world. However, what is unknown is how such differences in customers' perceptions manifest in influencing corporate B2B web sites' effectiveness. Our research attempts to bridge this gap with a field-study of 368 business customers from two different continents – North America and Europe.

Most multinational firms operating in B2B contexts, de-emphasize transaction/ordering information on their corporate web sites. Rather these companies provide links from their corporate web sites to their country-specific web sites where the actual commercial transactions are carried out because of the idiosyncratic nature of business environment in each country. Since our focus in this paper is on the dimensions of information in corporate web sites that influence business customers' perception of

such web sites, we do not investigate transaction-specific issues in this paper. The three factors of information (shown in Figure 1) that we investigate in this paper are culled from reviews of prior published research, content analysis of corporate web sites, and expert opinions and focus groups with customers. Informativeness is the ability of a web site to make information available. In this sense, informativeness is viewed as static information or content available on a corporate web site. Usability of information relates to users' perceived ability to utilize the information provided by a corporate web site. These perceptions are often strongly influenced by the corporate web site interface design, specifically its navigational and interactive features. Quality of Information refers to the quality of the content in a corporate web site and the suitability of the content from a user's perspective.

A multinational power tools company's corporate web site was used to solicit (using a hyperlink) visitors to participate in a web-based survey (hosted independently by a marketing research company). As an incentive, the respondents were offered a chance to win a high-end drill/driver (retail price about \$200) manufactured by the power tools company. We used structural equation modeling to analyze the data collected from 368 respondents.

We found that geographical location of the web site visitor (i.e., North America versus Europe), moderates the structural relationships between the exogenous and the endogenous constructs in our model shown in Figure 1. This is an important finding and suggests that managers of B2B corporate web sites need to be very careful in designing their sites and not try to use "one shoe fits all" approach when dealing with business customers from North America or Europe. The results from our study suggest that the factors that are important in customers' perceptions of corporate web site effectiveness differ across geographic regions of the world and companies need to consider this issue in their design of corporate web sites. Given that it is technologically possible for a company to figure out based on the IP address of a visitor (or using cookies) as to which part of the world the visitor is coming from, perhaps a company can use different versions of its corporate web site (emphasizing different factors) that can be created on the fly using dynamic portal technologies to uniquely appeal to visitors from different parts of the world.

Selected References

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Figure 1: Informational Antecedents of Web Site Effectiveness

