

# Conceptualizing the value of social media use by small and medium enterprises

*Research-in-Progress*

## Introduction

For example, viral marketing influences customers' brand awareness, information acquisition, attitudes, purchase behavior, post purchase communication and evaluation (Mangold and Faulds 2009; Palka et al. 2009). The use of social media is not without concerns; not least that it enables customers to freely exchange information about products and services between themselves bypassing any organizational control of information exchange (Palka et al. 2009). In this fast developing and complex environment, organizations require an understanding of how social media tools and technologies can contribute towards building relationships with and between their customers.

Such understanding is particularly relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is characterized by the extensive use of mobile technologies. The trend towards use of mobile technologies was identified in early 2000 as a breakthrough for organizations to transform the way they market their products and services (Clarke, 2001). The main advantages of transactions via mobile technology are: ubiquity (available everywhere), localization (location-based marketing), personalization (tailored to the individual) and convenience (anytime anywhere, and improved quality of life) (Clarke 2001). These advantages can also apply to social media use as advances in mobile technology offer improved user interfaces for capturing new media content as and when required (Kim et al., 2010).

This research addresses the use of social media via mobile platforms in the context of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). SMEs are a vital component of every country's economic wealth and the opportunities for them to gain advantages from social media appear to lie in enhancing communication with customers and building relationships. The development of new technologies that is more accessible to smaller businesses that traditionally have not had the skills to effectively use IT, has the potential to change the business landscape. These technologies offer greater potential for effective use of IT, which has been identified as a key driver for increasing productivity gains in SMEs (Wielicki & Arendt, 2010).

This study aims to investigate how mobile use of social media can be used by SMEs to build relationships within their customer base that will ultimately contribute towards business value. It explores the ability of SMEs to increase their knowledge of customers and improve their communication processes, which in turn can lead to changes in the way such firms engage their customers, as well as strategize and adapt their processes. This first stage of the project examines the numerous factors involved in the topic area to develop a conceptual framework that will inform further stages of the research. The paper first addresses the current uses and trends of social media, before examining SMEs' use of information technologies. An examination of how social media influences business value leads into a discussion of how this is relevant within the sphere of understanding the customer. This study builds on the value discipline research of Treacy and Wiersema (1993) which focuses on the value of understanding the customer as part of the business strategy. Following an examination of the requirement to understand customer demographics, the final section presents the conceptual framework.

## Social Media

Social media consists "*of content, communities and Web 2.0 technologies*" (Kangas et al., 2007). In general, social media also "*refers to applications that are either completely based on user generated content or in which user generated content and the actions of users play a substantial role in increasing the value of the application or service*"(p. 12). Social media applications range from instant messaging to social networking sites that offer an instrument for users to interact, connect and communicate with each other and their mutual friends

(Correa et al. 2010). These applications are intended to generate, initiate and circulate new and emerging sources of online information about user's experiences of using products, brands, services and/or issues by allowing them to "post", "tag" "digg" or "blog", and so forth on the Internet (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Relevant literature reports that the key purpose of all forms of social media applications is to engage people (for example: Safko, 2010; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). In the case of business organizations, people engagement can lead towards the most desired outcome - that of profit generation. Safko (2010) suggests four ways to engage people with social media; communication, collaboration, education and entertainment. The challenge for businesses is to capitalize on the aforementioned collectively and not alternatively.

Recent trends in the use of social media indicate that businesses increasingly invest in the use of social media applications, with a significant increase in the number of these applications. This is evident in the review of the development of social media since 1997 (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). The research indicate the since 1997 a large number of applications have been launched and re-launched on different social networking features.

Further to the increase in social media sites and applications, it is also evident that the overall status of social media has moved from "buzz word" to a "strategic tool" (Eyrich et al. 2008). As a result, it has gained attention both from researchers and practitioners. On the one hand, practitioners are developing skills to better utilize this online communication technology (Dunn, 2010) and on the other hand, researchers are developing models to explore the business value and examining various aspects of the use of social media in dissimilar settings (Eyrich et al., 2008). Figure 1 highlights some common areas of current social media use. For example, in a public relations (PR) context Eyrich et al. (2008) examine the use of social media applications by PR professionals and report how they use these applications to perform their professional tasks. Eyrich et al.'s (2008) report shows that these professionals rely on more than one social media tool with varying levels of interest in each tool. Email, blogs, videoconferencing, pod cast and video sharing are found the most popular tools used by this group. Another important finding of this report highlights the increased trend of male employees using social media applications for work purposes in comparison with female employees. Eyrich et al. (2008) also find that the key intention of using social media by PR professionals is to better engage with their public by expediting the circulation of information to reach broader audiences. In the context of journalism, Lariscy et al. (2009) investigated the agenda-building role of social media content. They report that the user-generated content on social network sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter is becoming a key resource for journalists to get stories and to develop news reports. Although the survey conducted by Lariscy et al. (2009) reports unanimous agreement on the importance of social media, they also found that the majority of journalists are not utilizing this media effectively. The authors attribute this to the likelihood of an adoption gap based on learning, concluding that limited use is not related to lack of conceptual acceptance or perceived value.

While social media applications are finding a place in business thinking, their use has been widespread for social purposes for several years; Boyd & Ellison (2008) identify 1997 as a key point. Until recently, the younger generations have been the most active demographic group in the use of social media applications (Pascu, 2008) and they are also recognized as a key driver of the high penetration level of mobile technologies (Horrigan, 2008; Laursen, 2010). By the end of 2007, there were three times more mobile phone subscriptions worldwide than Internet users and an increasing number of Wi-Fi capable devices in the market (ABS research, 2007). Due to the increasing number of mobile phones (especially smart phones), the mobile use of social media applications on these devices has been a fast developing area (Pascu, 2008). Pascu (2008) identifies seven emerging concepts from the integration of mobile technologies and social media applications; Mobile micro-blogging, Mobile life streaming, Mobile social tagging, Mobile pod casting, Mobile social networking, Mobile media sharing and Mobile social gaming. These concepts have the potential to facilitate new heights of user interaction, collaboration and sharing and hence result in the realization of business value that can be derived from social media applications (Pascu 2008).



**Figure 1: Common areas of social media applications (Eyrich et al., 2008)**

## The SME Environment

While the increasing number of studies into mobile use of social media allows for identification of the benefits to businesses, there is a dearth of research into the application of these technologies to SMEs (for example: DeLone, 1988; Poon & Swatman, 1999; Cragg & King, 1993; Street & Meister, 2004). This has consequences for the adoption and use of social media in an environment that is well known for its cautious and often laggardly adoption of IT (Poon & Swatman, 1999). Despite the issues, the importance of SMEs should not be underestimated. They play an important role in national economies both as employers and by collectively contributing an average of 90% of national economic output (Wielicki & Arendt, 2010). In the European Union (EU) SMEs account for 90 million jobs and represent 99% of all enterprises (European Commission, 2003). Similarly, in North America they represent over 99% of all employers and generate over 80% of new jobs (Montazemi, 2006). Definitions of what constitutes an SME vary by industry and country. This study takes the EU definition of number of employees as micro (less than 10 employees), small (less than 50) and medium (less than 250) (European Commission, 2003). Despite their size, smaller businesses are often regarded as key in encouraging the development of a country's enterprise culture and in promoting business growth (Dyerson et al, 2009). Recognition of this role has promoted a wealth of research into the ability of SMEs to effectively use information technology (Cragg & King, 1993; Street & Meister, 2004), which has been identified as a key driver for increasing productivity gains in these firms (Wielicki & Arendt, 2010).

The barriers and drivers affecting the use of information technology in SMEs have been well established over several years. These were articulated by DeLone in the 1980s (DeLone, 1988) drawing on the early literature into computer usage by smaller businesses in the pre-Web period of the 1970s and 1980s. These early findings identify several barriers to the uptake of Information Technology by SMEs including technical knowledge, the need for senior management support, training considerations, and attitude (DeLone, 1988). The advent of new forms of technology such as personal computers and the Internet has potentially increased the uses of IT for SMEs, but barriers to widespread adoption remain. For example in the era of e-commerce, lack of technical knowledge remains a major difficulty for SMEs (Mehrtens et al., 2001) and resource constraints such as time, finance and IT skills are a common barrier to adoption (Street & Meister, 2004). Montazemi (2006) attributes the shortfall in technical skills and knowledge of IT to the centralized nature of the SME operational style where employees are assigned a variety of roles with little chance to specialise. A lack of technical expertise is often combined with a lack of managerial expertise that results in inappropriate or inefficient e-business initiatives (Mehrtens *et al.*, 2001).

However, where SMEs may be gaining benefits from IT is in the use of mobile devices. Smaller firms are more flexible and adaptable than larger organisations (Wickert & Herschel, 2001) and have showed an enthusiasm for mobile technologies from an early stage (Harker & Van Akkeren, 2002; Scheepers & McKay, 2004). As the technology has developed and become cheaper and more ubiquitous, smaller businesses have the opportunity to capitalise on the advantages of deploying a mobile workforce using applications such as text messaging, email and data transfer (Knights, 2006). Early research suggests that the use of mobile

technologies is enabling SMEs to explore the potential of social media and gain some advantages (Bulearca & Bulearca, 2010). The business press is more exuberant regarding the potential of applications such as Twitter to promote business growth, although they report a lack of enthusiasm in many small businesses linked to the perception that online networks do not create business value (Economist, 2010).

As discussed the benefits of social media lie in the ability of firms to interact with their customers as seen by the anticipation of the drive towards customer value or relationship marketing (Ravald & Gronroos, 1996; Woodruff, 1997). To maximise their ability to realise the benefits from social media, organisations will need to plan strategies to create bonds that strengthen customer loyalty (Ravald & Gronroos, 1996). This requires an understanding of the complexities and consequences of using mobile social media to support and inform strategic planning. While the development of e-business has encouraged more managerial expertise in SMEs' planning and implementation of IT, the strategizing abilities of SMEs remains proportionally low in comparison with larger organisations (Dyerson et al., 2009). E-business initiatives are not always seen as strategically viable or desirable despite competent use of the Internet for basic level tasks such as email and information gathering (Wielicki & Arendt, 2010). SMEs often take a different approach to strategic benefits that can be gained from new technologies and use a more staged process towards adoption and implementation (Dyerson et al., 2009; Wielicki & Arendt, 2010).

Customer relationship management in SMEs is rarely formally addressed and tends to be driven by the experience of the business owner (Lindman, 2004). From an IT perspective, Dyerson et al.'s (2009) study of UK SMEs found the use of IT in this domain to be focussed on the more superficial levels of communication, ignoring the opportunities for more strategic uses such as facilitating interaction with customers, collection of customer information and building dynamic websites. This has consequences in terms of implementing customer-orientated technologies such as mobile social media. The uptake of technologies is often a cost issue where an SME has to perceive benefits, understand the business value and see a viable return for their investment before they will adopt (Wielicki & Arendt, 2010). To recognise and gain the full benefits from mobile use of social media, SMEs need to be able to understand the strategies required to interact with customers in such a way as to create business value.

## **Strategizing for Business Value**

The use of IT to create business value has been much debated over the years particularly with regard to how this should or could be assessed (e.g., Brynjolfsson 1993; Hitt and Brynjolfsson 1996; Willcocks et al. 1997; Brynjolfsson and Hitt 1998, 2000; Weill and Broadbent 1998; Melville et al. 2004; Aral et al. 2006). A comprehensive review of this ongoing debate is beyond the scope of this paper and it is noted that the literature does not specifically address the scope of SMEs. Nevertheless, determining how business value is to be gained from IT remains crucial for smaller businesses who will only invest where they can see a return (Poon & Swatman, 2009). Melville et al. (2004) classify prior research into the business value of IT into three levels of inquiry: at the levels of the focal organization (including intra-firm business processes), the competitive environment (e.g., industry) and the macro environment (e.g., country characteristics). One of the conclusions that they draw is that 'IT impacts organizational performance via intermediate business processes'. This accord with Tallon et al.'s (2000) categorization of derived value from IT at the business process level, drawing on the activities in Porter's value chain. For example, process planning and support can be improved through enhancements in communication and coordination through the use of IT; economies of scale can be attained which could improve production and operations processes; customer relations can be established, sustained and improved by means of IT, which can lead to improved market share. It is in the last of these examples that social media is projected to have the greatest potential [Economist, 2010; Blanchard, 2011].

There are several anecdotal reports of social media being used inappropriately by employees and, as with many new technologies, identifying business value can be problematic. Blanchard (2011) addresses the key issue that may be overlooked in the hype surrounding the use of social media. He emphasizes that value can only be generated by recognizing that social media is a tool that must be incorporated into existing strategies and used to support existing business objectives. This reflects Porter's (2000) arguments, in the early days of e-business, regarding the need to see the Internet as a tool for meeting strategic goals rather than an end

in itself. These arguments resonate in the business world as highlighted by Dunn (2010) who identifies the benefits of utilizing social media technologies as complementary customer channels in an established business with the aim of contributing to business value.

Bringing social media into the context of mobile use offers additional considerations to the enhancement of business value. The proliferation and new advancements of mobility, portability and ubiquity in information technology brings new values to the enterprises (Basole 2004). Ubiquitous access to information and people, enhancing decision making capabilities, and creating a user-centric environment are some of the fascinating aspects of the use of mobile technologies in enterprises (Basole 2004). Similarly, (Perry et al. 2001) argue that the convenience and efficiency are key advantages associated with the use of mobile technologies. Cost savings, flexibility, device familiarity, and the ability to address time-critical, spontaneous, and mobility related needs are some of the business values of mobile technologies suggested by Anckat and D’Incau (2002). While the value proposition of mobile technologies are ample, Basole (2004) advocates the three main categories of business values of mobile technologies including efficiency, effectiveness, and convenience.

Within these arguments of how to create value from IT, the work of Treacy and Wiersema (1993) bears relevance to the highly socializing potential of social media technologies. Their value discipline research addresses the advantages of redefining value from the perception of the customer, whether the firm takes an operational, customer or product leadership strategic path.

### ***The Value Discipline of an Organization***

Treacy and Wiersema (1993) highlight the value of understanding the customer as part of the business strategy of the organization. The value discipline of the organization determines what type of knowledge is required about the customer and what type of communication should be used to communicate with customers. They identify three value disciplines associated with organizations that excel in understanding their customer:

- **Operational Excellence:** A strategy for producing and delivering products and services at competitive prices with a minimum of inconvenience. This includes minimizing overhead costs, eliminating intermediate production steps, reducing transaction costs, and optimizing business processes. The customer of this type of organization wants high quality goods or services but, most importantly they want a product or service cheaply and easily.
- **Customer intimacy:** A strategy that places an understanding of the client at the forefront of business activity. This strategy requires business processes that are flexible and responsive, information systems that collect, integrate and analyze data from many sources, organizational structure that empower employees to work closely with customers and attempt to be flexible in meeting the clients’ needs. The customer wants a specific product or service and they are prepared to pay for this privilege.
- **Product leadership:** A strategy to produce state of the art products and services. Requirements for this strategy are 1) creativity; 2) commercialize rapidly; 3) relentlessly pursue new solutions. The customer of this service and product wants something new, different and unusual.

These disciplines address the prominent role of the customer in judging value in a product or service. Teacy and Wiersma (1993) advocate placing customer needs and perceptions of value concepts of convenience, dependability and service above quality and price. They argue that whichever value discipline provides the focus of the company, the role of delivering superior customer value is paramount. This perspective resonates with new directions for “marketing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Woodruff, 1997, p 139) that argue that customer value and relationship marketing are key to the creation and sustainability of competitive advantage (Ravald & Gronroos, 1996, Woodruff, 1997).

### ***Engaging the Customer***

Building relationships with customers is a key marketing objective and social media contributes to a “new marketing reality” (Kozinets et al., 2010. p71). Traditionally the main sources of communication between the organization and customer have been print advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion and public relations (Mangold & Faulds,

2009). Social Media and mobile technologies have enabled organizations to expand the ways in which they communicate with customers through their marketing strategies. Organizations can utilize three marketing strategies (Palka et al. 2009): push (information is sent to customers), pull (customers request information), and more recently, viral (information is exchanged between customers). Viral marketing has gained prominence with the advent of social media accessed via mobile platforms (Mangold and Faulds 2009; Palka et al. 2009) which influences customer behavior such as the awareness, information acquisition, attitudes, purchase behavior, post purchase communication and evaluation. The main concern that organizations have is that social media enable customers to freely exchange information about products and services (Mangold and Faulds 2009), whereas in traditional marketing communication the information exchange is carefully controlled by the organization (Palka et al. 2009). Organizations therefore need to understand how these technologies can contribute towards their interaction with customers and also need to develop strategies to manage electronic viral marketing.

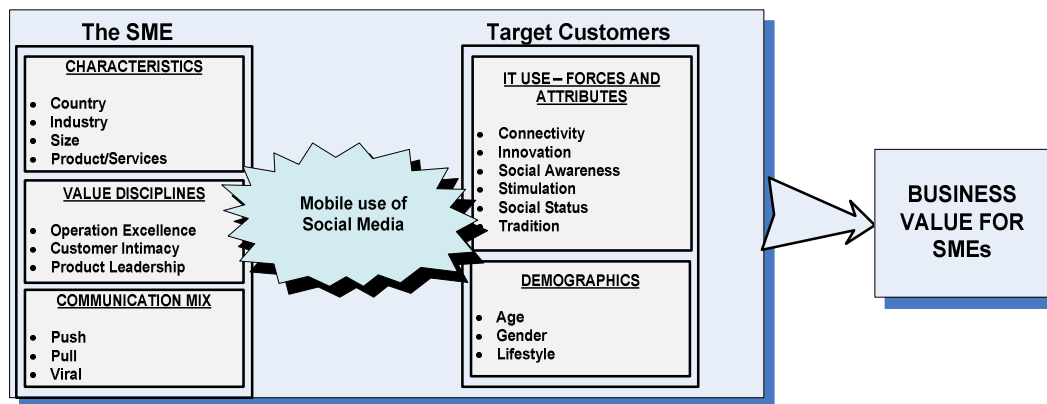
Regardless of the use of social media applications by a particular group of professionals, the demographic profile of the adopters has attracted significant interest from researchers. It is argued that different demographic characteristics have different trends and interests toward the use of social media applications. Ericsson Consumer and Enterprise Laboratory has developed a model for consumer segments based on six forces that drives people's values and attitudes towards technology (Andersson et al., 2006): connectivity (the need to stay in touch), innovation (a positive or negative perception of new technology), social awareness (the importance of social issues versus individual needs), stimulation (self-orientation and instant desire for gratification), social status (need to be recognized as socially and financially successful), and tradition (the belief that the technology does not always solve problems). Andersson et al. (2006) refined Ericsson's consumer segments based on age, education and employment status. The extended consumer segments are young pioneers, adult pioneers, young materialists, adult materialists, educated sociables, older sociables, educated achievers, older achievers and traditionalists. Each one of these segments uses technology in a specific way. The rate of adoption by each customer segment can be placed (Andersson, et al., 2006) on the adoption curve as developed by Rogers (1995). The adoption curve identify five different groups of adopters based on what stage they will adopt the technology (Rogers, 1995). These groups of adopters are innovators (the first group to adopt a new technology), early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards (the last group to adopt a new technology) (Rogers, 1995). The relative sizes and rates of adoption depend on the product that is adopted (Andersson, et al., 2006). For example it will be expected that traditionalists will be the last to adopt a technology. Therefore, understanding which client segment an SME is targeting will aid in selecting the mode of communication. For example, developing a Facebook site to market a product or service to 50-69 year olds (i.e. traditionalists) will not reach the target market as these group of users have not adopted Facebook. However, if the target market is young materialists (i.e. 15 to 24-year-olds) the use of Facebook would be more appropriate.

Pascu (2008) takes a more individual perspective and argues that the adoption of social media is shaped not only by age but also by gender. As compared to boys (aged 15-17 years), girls are more likely to visit social networking sites and have profiles online. Similarly, out of all demographic groups, most of the increase in the growth in using social networking sites comes from woman (especially, aged 50-64 years). Different demographic groups exhibit different approaches toward the use of social media applications; for example, people between aged 18-25 years like to switch between applications and use more than one application simultaneously (Pascu 2008).

The new marketing reality raises a problematic issue for SMEs who often do understand that their customer base is not a homogenous whole where 'one size fits all' (Parrott et al., 2010). Parrott et al., (2010) argue that SMEs are 'failing to gain a deeper insight into the "true" nature of their customers' (p.198) and will therefore not be able to take advantage of effective and relevant communications in the current era of social networks. Research into this area to identify the benefits of social media uptake will contribute to addressing this issue.

## Conceptualizing the Value of Mobile Social Media

The complexity of this project lies in the drawing together of the range of technologies and associated issues within the context of SMEs. The proposed conceptual framework in Figure 2 illustrates the interlinking of the different facets that contribute to this research project that aims to examine how mobile social media can be used by SMEs to improve relationships with customers and ultimately enhance business value. The building of relationships within their customer base is key to realizing the benefits of the mobile use of social media. The SME context requires a holistic view of the SMEs' environments, influenced by industry, country and ownership. Within that environment a more strategic view of the way an SME operates is required in terms of the value disciplines and in the marketing planning of communication methods.



**Figure 2: Value of Mobile Social Media**

The characteristics, value discipline of the SME will impact the choice of communication with the customers. The demographic attributes of the targeted customer base will influence the choice of social media. The demographic attributes of the target customers are drawn from the literature and are influenced by the attributes of the Ericsson report's six forces that drive customers' attitudes and value towards technology (Andersson et al., 2006). Although Andersson et al. (2006) extended these segmentations to include demographic attributes, these have been separated in the framework to acknowledge the fast moving pace of social media adoption by a wide range of people as identified by Pascu (2008). Mobile technologies enhance the use of social media, the provision of user friendly platforms for social media applications and the attitude of target customers towards mobile technologies will influence the adoption of social media by SMEs.

## Moving the Research Forward

This research in progress paper investigates and draws together the literature to provide a framework that conceptualizes the value of social media in the context of SMEs. The use of social media offers a range of potential benefits to organizations that facilitates a greater understanding of and connection with their customers. By investigating the use of social media within the framework of the value disciplines of operational excellence, customer intimacy and product leadership, this research will provide a strategic basis for the development of social media use that aligns with a firm's objectives. This is particularly important to SMEs where strategic planning is often weak and where understanding of customer needs minimal.

This research is planned to develop in three phases and will focus on understanding the role of each of the concept fields illustrated in Figure 3 and how they contribute towards business value. The first phase will take a case study approach to collecting empirical data that will provide a current view of how SMEs are currently using mobile social media and how they communicate with their customers. A second phase will approach the study from a customer perspective using focus groups, drawn from the consumer segments illustrated in the target

customer section of the framework. The final phase of the research will bring together the findings to develop models for effective use of social media for interacting with customers that will be evaluated by a range of SMEs representing the value disciplines articulated in the framework.

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