

Electronic mail appraisal: a buyer and seller survey

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Abstract:

The communication environment for buyer-seller interfaces is being transformed by a variety of new communication choices. The use of electronic mail in business today is especially prevalent. This investigation explores buyer and seller reactions to electronic mail use in buyer-seller relationships. Two studies conducted explore themes perceived by buyers and sellers regarding electronic mail use. From in-depth interviews of sellers, some initial themes are developed. Second, a survey from a sampling frame of business-to-business sales people and organizational buyers advances the questions of benefits and barriers perceived to be associated with electronic mail use from both the organizational buyer and seller perspectives. From a sample of 103 buyers and 107 sellers, questions are raised about the communicative and relationship aspects that potentially influence the buyer-seller interface. Findings suggest sellers need to be attuned to individual buyers' views in order to benefit from the new communication options regarding communication choices.

Keywords: communications | business-to-business marketing | sales | organizations | buyers | electronic mail

Article:

Introduction

Communication technologies

Both scholars and practitioners seek to understand changes that typically accompany the use of new communication technologies. According to Riva (1998), social scientists are increasingly interested in understanding the characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Today's workplace has grown dependent upon CMC as is evidenced in the rapid expansion of electronic mail (e-mail), marketing and purchasing via the Internet and use of company extranets, Internet relay chat, and fully integrated electronic communication between firms. The latter refers to both voice and video communication mediated through digital transfer and using computer input and output devices. All indications are that along with other forms of CMC, e-

mail is becoming increasingly important in meeting business demands and a clearer understanding of the use of this medium in business-to-business (B2B) buyer-seller exchanges has, in turn, become business critical.

E-mail has been used to control and abuse employees (Romm and Pilskin, 1999). It is generally recognized that clearer understanding and policies for e-mail use are needed (Parker, 1999). Rowley (1999, p. 74) submits that:

... organizations have embraced e-mail without always reflecting significantly on the effect that CMC may have on working practices.

This investigator calls for more research to explore fundamental questions surrounding environments with predominant use of CMC in the form of e-mail, electronic meetings and conferences. In their qualitative examination of e-mail use by senior managers in a variety of organizations, Stevens and McElhill (2000) noted that firms fail to consider all implications of the medium. These researchers documented several factors (e.g. corporate culture, individual influences, information-management influences and knowledge management) that dictated the extent and type of e-mail use. Furthermore, they suggest that advances in e-mail use stem from trial and error rather than the concentrated efforts of business strategists.

Communication media

An investigation of communication media use in purchasing and supply chains specific to the buyer-seller relationship separates tactical from strategic uses of various communication media (Larson and Kulchitsky, 2000, p. 38) . This research supported the notion that more cooperative and collaborative relationships are desirable, and concluded:

... the role of information technology in enabling communication to support these closer relationships remains unclear.

Given the pervasive calls for additional research in the area of e-mail use and also the need for more research into buyer-seller communication processes, the purpose of this current study is to provide an exploratory examination of the phenomenon of e-mail use in B2B buyer-seller relationships. The following elements converge to demonstrate the need for this research:

- a lack of extant research – both empirical and theoretical – for hypothesizing possible outcomes of computer mediated buyer-seller communication; and
- continued escalation in use of e-mail in B2B relationships.

Marketing literature

While research has explored marketing to consumers via CMC environments (Alba *et al.*, 1997; Hoffman and Novak, 1996) inter-organizational CMC has not been addressed in the marketing literature. By 2003, voice communication is predicted to represent less than 2 percent of all telecommunication traffic (Cairncross, 1997; Davis and Meyer, 1998).

The current research explores the use of communication within the arena of the buyer-seller relationship. First, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted as a pilot study. The second study, and primary focus of this article, is a short-answer survey conducted to expand the understanding of both benefits and challenges perceived in buyer-seller use of e-mail. Responses from 107 salespeople and 103 organizational buyers specific to use of e-mail and how it is being evaluated by buyers and sellers when used in the sales process resulted from the survey.

Marketing B2B communication

Communication is a construct typically addressed in marketing literature focused on sales communication, channels of distribution, and relationship marketing. However, two aspects are often neglected in such studies. First, communication is commonly treated as an isolated variable, rather than a process that unfolds to create meaning between the involved parties. Research focus on the processes of information exchange and relationship development in inter-organizational communication can logically take marketers one step further in understanding the links and reasons behind particular facets or outcomes of communication choices (Zaltman *et al.*, 1982). Second, communication in buyer-seller relationships is vastly understudied due to the rapidly changing technology within the communication environment where these relationships occur. As options have increased to include the current plethora of media choices (e.g. various mediated communication options such as phone, fax and various uses of CMC including e-mail, intra-nets, extra-nets and the Internet), the issue of how these choices influence buyer-seller interaction remains unclear and current research does not fully reflect the complexity of the communication-exchange processes between organizational sellers and buyers. Process orientation and the persuasive nature of communication are underscored as important aspects of communication in marketing (Mohr and Nevin, 1990).

Inter-firm relationships

Communication is an important element linking the underlying and frequently studied constructs of trust, commitment, and power in inter-organizational relationships (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998). While marketing literature includes many examples examining channel and other inter-organizational relationships, only a few of these studies examine communication in inter-firm relationships (e.g. Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Heide and Milner, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Weitz and Jap, 1995). Morgan and Hunt list seven of ten important marketing relationships that are inter-organizational in nature, including the buyer-seller relationship, demonstrating the importance of such relationships within the realm of marketing. In 1998, Duncan and Moriarty note a deficiency in the marketing literature, noting the failure to include the communication process in research in relationship marketing, while that same literature focuses on products of communication such as trust and commitment. Mohr *et al.* (1994) found that relationships with more collaborative communication were better than those with less collaborative communication.

Theoretical research

Theoretical research in marketing channel-communications literature is scant, given that communication is acknowledged as vital in the foundational functioning of such marketing

channels. A communication-related study is Mohr and Nevin's (1996) examination of the influence of collaboration on satisfaction, commitment and coordination demonstrating support for collaboration as positively related to all three outcomes. Weitz and Jap (1995) address future research needs in the area of relationship marketing and distribution channels by calling for more research into topics related to B2B relationships, including marketing communication themes. With the increased focus on marketing relationships, the call for a communication based model for managing relationships (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998) is optimistic. They suggest that interactivity and communication technologies play a role in the shift to a relationship (versus exchange) paradigm, highlighting questions the current investigation begins to address. Given the lack of theoretical basis in marketing literature, relevant theories in management, communication and information systems (IS) literature are reviewed below in order to offer a foundational guide for analysis of CMC in the buyer-seller relationship.

Theoretical foundations

In a taxonomy of mediated interpersonal communication, Cathcart and Gumpert (1994, p. 161) define interpersonal mediated communication as "any situation where a technological medium is introduced" including telephone conversations, letters, CB radio, e-mail and audio and video cassettes. It is only when the technological device introduced into the communication process is a computer that the term CMC becomes appropriate. The term has become widely accepted, appearing in manuscript titles for studies of e-mail use (Mantovani, 1994; Riva, 1998; Walther, 1995). Within the choice of options for communication modes, it is differentiated from face-to-face, or from other mediated communication forms such as letters, faxes and telephone calls. CMC is generally viewed as unique from those other modes of communication. Although many forms of CMC exist, today e-mail prevails as a widely accepted means of communication in business.

Information richness theory

A stream of research surrounding the development of a rationale choice model for making communication choice decisions among available media known as information richness theory (IRT) exists in management literature. Based on the theoretical and empirical work of noted management scholars (Daft *et al.*, 1987), IRT offers the notion that choice of communication media ranges from lean to rich. Moreover, lean media, such as memos and other written documents do not carry as many communication cues as rich media, such as face-to-face meetings, where immediate feedback and a wide variety of communication cues are available to both the sender and receiver of the respective message. This theory further posits that managers will choose rich media for addressing problems of ambiguity, while lean media are appropriately selected to deliver factual information that serves to reduce uncertainty in managerial decisions (Daft *et al.*, 1987).

Rival hypotheses

IRT has been challenged in the literature related to communication and information systems by rival hypotheses. One of these, social presence theory, posits that communicators choose a medium for their message based upon their perspective of the degree of social presence; that is,

psychological perception of the presence of a communication partner (Straub and Karahanna, 1998). Another theory offered in the communication literature is social influence theory. Social influences are defined as work-group norms and co-worker and supervisor influences that, in turn, effect choices regarding media use in organizational settings (Fulk *et al.*, 1990; Schmitz and Fulk, 1991). Social influence theory may complement rational choice models, rather than compete with them, in explaining managers' choices of communication media (Webster and Trevino, 1995). Another theory from the IS literature is critical social theory, which posits that the context and norms of social action are essential to the process, and that effective communicators will work to free themselves of inaccurate or incomplete communication (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997). Walther (1995) examines CMC over time in his research related to business management. His findings suggested that CMC is a more satisfying medium than previously indicated and his research calls for evaluation of the medium as it relates to interpersonal dimensions known to affect work-related outcomes.

Coordinating joint projects

In relation to cooperative work, Wellman (1996) notes that CMC can be of great assistance to organizations in negotiations between buyers and sellers and in coordinating joint projects. According to Mantovani (1994), neither social cues nor complex interactions are absent from CMC. Investigations include findings that position CMC as having more in common with interpersonal interaction than with technical procedures; noting that communication is viewed as an information transfer, and also as the activation of a psycho-social relationship (Riva, 1998). In contrast, Flaherty (1998) finds that CMC use presents motives that are different from interpersonal communication motives, concluding that the Internet is not a true alternative to face-to-face communication.

Minsky and Marin (1999) attempted to expand the existing understanding of the choice decisions surrounding use of communication media. These researchers examined individual differences that they hypothesized to be interacting with factors identified in information richness theory and social influence theory in their study. They concluded that a more comprehensive model of e-mail selection and use is needed. Yet another view (Phillips and Eisenberg, 1996) offers the notion that uses of e-mail develop via recursive interplay between the media and social structures, building on Barley's (1986) notion that technology uses co-evolve together with the work-groups within which the technology is used. These studies indicate that how technology is used is actually fashioned by the demands of the work itself, and that the work is, at the same time, molded and shaped by technology as people begin to employ technology in that situation.

Brief review

This brief review is offered to provide evidence that no single, clear theoretical base has been established in the social science literature that provides a sufficient foundation for marketers to understand why buyers or sellers make the communication choices they do, nor how CMC is influencing overall communication in buyer-seller relationships. Considering the importance of a relationships and communication in marketing, it is useful at this point to utilize a discovery-oriented methodology to investigate the nature of CMC in marketing relationships.

Methodology

In-depth interviews were used to achieve the research objectives of integrating multiple perspectives (e.g. marketing, communication, IS), describing the experience of individuals, and developing a holistic description of how this process works (Weiss, 1994). Second, a short answer survey aimed at specifically exploring the evaluation, both positive and negative, of e-mail use in the buyer-seller interface was conducted. Gummerson (2001) called for greater use of qualitative methods within marketing research and noted the lack of this perspective in the field. He argued that qualitative methods can add to the breadth and depth of our understanding of marketing and organizational issues. The current research is qualitative in nature and allows the judgments being made by buyers and sellers regarding e-mail use in the buyer-seller interface to surface.

Themes

The research questions explored in the interview study seek to uncover themes around questions such as:

- How are sellers evaluating e-mail versus other options in their communication exchanges with buyers and what are the underlying motives for making these judgments?
- What are perceived evaluations of e-mail versus other options in their exchanges between buyers and sellers?

In-depth interviews: study one

Interviews

Seven interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes were conducted with sales executives involved in B2B relationships. Interviews were tape recorded with the informants' permission. All interviews were transcribed then coded to reflect inductive themes from the data using QSRNud*ist 4.0 software, and analyzed using a social science framing analysis standard in qualitative analysis (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The coding was an inductive analysis with themes intentionally established from the informants' responses to allow for determination of categories from the informants' own words. Inductive discovery can be considered as an alternative to analysis of pre-determined categories drawn from an existing theoretical perspective. The development of inductive categories allows for grounding of the categories to the data from which they were derived (Berg, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This process is the basis of the social science method known as the grounded theory approach to discovery oriented research, as established by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Study one findings: benefits, barriers and individual responses

Mediated communication

Participants frequently referred to telephone (i.e. voice mail), fax, and e-mail mediated communication. Some also mentioned the use of company extranet communication tools recently

implemented; however, most buyer-seller communication referenced was e-mail, telephone, fax or face-to-face communication.

While there was considerable variation in descriptions of their experience with technology changes, several common themes also emerged. Major themes associated with CMC are identified under the three category labels of benefits, barriers, and individual issues.

Benefits. The benefits of CMC noted in the interviews did not reveal any surprises; in fact, they reflected the often lauded efficiency and effectiveness of many mediated communication options. Reduced costs, speed, ease of information use, and expanded use of information sharing comprised the four themes that were categorized as benefits.

Financial savings

Confirming the efficiency aspects of using CMC, significant financial savings were mentioned by several informants, especially as compared to costs of physical (i.e. paper) delivery of information. Speed of communication and breadth of reach with a single message were also mentioned. Respondents appreciated the benefit of enhanced timeliness of communication using e-mail and other mediated technologies, such as the fax. Two other benefit themes – ease of information use and expanded use of information – were often jointly identified. A recognized need for expanding the use of the company’s accumulated knowledge beyond firm boundaries, and especially with customers, was noted and CMC was seen as enabling this expanded use of knowledge. One participant explained that CMC allows the firm to use information more effectively to achieve a goal of being closer to the customer. The expectations of achieving efficiency benefits of CMC are being realized. There were, however, some implications of using CMC and other mediated communication options that were less positive. Several of these were classified as barriers to communication.

Barriers. An overabundance of media choices and messages was mentioned frequently as a problem. Also the use of mediated communication to exert some level of avoidance or to gain personal control over use of time was viewed as a barrier to communication by these executives. Within the theme of avoidance/control, an accountability sub-category emerged as the CMC and particularly e-mail was used to “cover your backside”. Third, general misuse of technology or choosing what was deemed the wrong media in a given situation was a noted challenge. Overusing technology at the expense of delivering a clear, concise message was described by some participants.

Avoiding communication

Within the noted barriers to communication, of interest to sellers, is its use by buyers to control or avoid communication. Customers exert control, therefore power, in the relationship through communication technology. As an illustration, one major customer, as reported by the interviewee, will not answer the telephone, and, in fact, will only accept phone calls or face-to-face meetings when prior e-mail communication has secured an appointment for the call or meeting. A specific form of control is the implied increase in accountability with written communication, specifically e-mail over voice-mail communication.

Individual outcomes. The three themes identified as personal responses to CMC use are:

1. increased work stress;
2. frustration with loss of the “personal touch” (or ability to include non-verbal cues in the message); and
3. a need for training and norms for optimal and accurate use of new media options.

While the third theme, a need for training and norms, could be considered an organizational issue more than a personal issue, the informants described this as a larger social issue rather than a purely organizational one.

Work stress

Informants reported increased work stress in the form of reactions of a sense of urgency or anxiety related to e-mail use, in particular. One participant noted the stress of returning to his office after a brief absence to face a number of waiting e-mail messages. He reported devoting himself first to responding to e-mail messages as a priority, implying e-mail messages connote a general sense of urgency for him, more urgency than phone messages. Some expression of frustration with the inability to incorporate non-verbal cues and emotional indicators in e-mail or extranet communication choices was evident in the interview dialogue. The study also surfaced a recognition of a need for training with new communication media. One respondent noted the speed of change with new technology as an issue and that a learning curve is necessary for using new media for communication, while another lamented the lack of training for today’s communication environment.

Summary of interviews. Descriptions provided by the in-depth interviews surfaced perceived benefits and barriers to buyer-seller communication and relationships. The aim of the survey conducted in this current research is to explore those themes further, examining both buyer and seller perceptions.

Study two: short answer survey

Primary focus

A sample composed of firms in the USA across a variety of industries provides data for the second study which is the primary focus of this research. The sample was a convenience sample comprising organizational buyers and sellers surveyed by students of two MBA classes as part of their course work at a large, metropolitan university in the southern USA. The surveys were distributed with a cover letter on university letterhead; thus the research was identified as a study that was being undertaken to help gain insight into the use of e-mail in business settings. The students hand delivered the survey and then picked it up from the respondents. Students were required to turn in the participants name and contact information. A total of 298 surveys were distributed between January and April 2000, resulting in 210 useable and complete questionnaires. Of these, 103 were organizational buyers and 107 were business-to-business salespeople. The participating organizations represented a wide variety of industries including

legal services, computer systems, management consulting, general contractors, electrical supplies, commercial printing, electronic parts, newspapers and specialty stores. No individual industry was represented in sufficient numbers to analyze by industry or SIC code in this diverse sample.

The short survey asked buyers and sellers to identify their use of e-mail, fax, telephone and face-to-face communication in the buyer-seller relationship with a focus on one specific recent purchase that was identified and described as the focal relationship and purchase for the survey responses by each participant. Three open ended short answer questions regarding computer mediated communication in the buying process were included at the end of the survey and form the basis for the analysis and subsequent reporting in this study. The larger, overall study was designed to elicit descriptions of the communication buyers (salespeople) used (e.g. face-to-face, phone, Internet, etc.) in relationships with salespeople (buyers) at various points in the buying process. The study also asked them to report what types of communication media they would prefer to use at each stage of the buying process. The open-ended response questions described in this study came after the respondents had reported on the various types of communication they used during the buying process.

Questions

Note that electronic communication was identified by most participants as their use of e-mail in their responses to the three questions. Using supplier Web sites and extranets for information gathering, and using the Internet for identifying prospective customers were additional CMC uses noted and referenced by some participants. The questions asked of respondents were:

- What are the greatest challenges you face in purchasing/selling when using electronic communication?
- When communicating with salespeople/suppliers, what are the greatest benefits you receive from using electronic communication?
- Have you any other observations to share regarding buyer-supplier communication within the current marketing environment?

These question further explore themes surrounding benefits and barriers that emerged from the first study. The analysis focuses primarily on the first two questions with the third question providing an avenue for respondents to raise other issues. The hand-written responses were typed into a text document and subsequently imported into QSRNud*ist 4.0 software for analysis. Data were coded to reflect inductive themes, once again following grounded theory method guidelines prevalent in research of this nature (Berg, 1998). Each response was coded to the one category that best represented the main idea it expressed. While most of the responses referred to e-mail, they also addressed seeking information directly from seller Web sites and other information exchange options, such as extranets offered to supply chain partners. The results from buyer and seller responses are shown in Table I.

Table I. Appraisal of e-mail use in the buyer-seller relationship (percentage of respondents classified by thematic category of response)

| | Benefits reported | Respondents (%) | Challenges reported | Respondents (%) |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Buyers (<i>n</i> = 103) | Speed/ease/flexibility | 67 | Technology issues | 33 |
| | Advantages vs. telephone | 15 | Communication/relationship issues | 28 |
| | Written record | 11 | Finding suppliers or information | 20 |
| | Improved information | 8 | Time issues | 11 |
| | Other | 0 | Other | 7 |
| Sellers (<i>n</i> = 107) | Speed/ease/efficiency | 83 | Technology issues | 50 |
| | Written record | 8 | Communication/relationship issues | 25 |
| | Other | 9 | Other | 25 |
| | | | | (includes: limited access to the communication tools, lack of technical support and lack of training, along with personal preference issues not classified as communication or relationship issues) |

Responses

Buyers. The responses from buyers when asked what challenges they experienced were coded into the following four categories:

1. technology issues;
2. communication/relationship issues;
3. identifying suppliers or information issues; and
4. time issues.

The first substantive category, technology, drew such responses as: security issues, fraud, lack of bandwidth and Web delays, reliability/security issues and systems failures. These responses indicate technical issues; however, they also point to existing challenges with technology functionality limiting buyers in the effective execution of their purchasing tasks. Buyers lauded technology as an effective way to resolve variations from published prices or options.

Relationship issues

In responses categorized as relationship issues, buyers also noted a need for telephone and in person communication to develop the relationships (saying that the Internet is used for quick information). These responses support the ideas of rich and lean media offered by information richness theory, with rich media for relationship issues rife with ambiguity and lean media sufficing when information is needed to reduce uncertainty. Trust was also raised as an issue, indicated by participant responses such as: “I don’t know if I am dealing with a trustworthy person”. The third most frequently mentioned theme indicated that buyers use the Internet and CMC, primarily e-mail, to find suppliers and information. Respondents mentioned finding qualified vendors, finding interesting offers, and obtaining data to compare products and services.

Social influence theory

Industry acceptance was a noted challenge. However, these comments were not aligned with the notions presented in social influence theory, rather, they were pointed toward a more a functional aspect in line with the idea of network externalities (using e-mail is increasingly valuable for each individual as more individuals have e-mail and use it), an idea that stems from transaction cost economics (Williamson, 1985, 1989). Another response was “a lack of suppliers that have the facilities to communicate” indicating a need for sellers to try to match buyers’ needs in terms of communication preferences.

Buyers surveyed mentioned time-related issues as challenges to purchasing using electronic communication. The notion that communication is not synchronous was a common complaint and delayed responses from communication partners were noted. One illustrative response indicated “I would like a reply in four business hours”. This is a problem that has been documented elsewhere. According to a recent survey, only 41 percent of business-to-business (B2B) companies respond to customers’ e-mail inquiries within six hours, and within that group, a mere 50 percent resolve the situation accurately. However, the comments regarding lack of synchronous communication contrast with many responses indicating electronic communication is faster for buying/selling needs, hence, more efficient, than other modes of communication. In summary, buyers indicated that the challenges inherent in using electronic communication are technical, communicative, informational, and have to do with recipient availability and/or the immediacy of response. These data support prior research findings of CMC use in other contexts. The tenets of information richness theory, transaction cost economics, and also the idea that urgency and availability of the intended communication partner are important (Straub and Karahanna, 1998) are all supported as relevant to organizational buyers’ media choice decisions by the data gathered in this study.

Benefits

Benefits buyers described in using electronic communication formed the following four themes:

1. speed/ease/flexibility;
2. advantages versus the telephone;
3. the ability of e-mail to provide a record; and
4. access to more information/accurate information.

The most frequent response involved expected efficiency benefits; the speed, efficiency, ease, and convenience associated with electronic communication. Fully 67 percent of buyer responses to the query about the benefits they perceive were classified in this category. Responses frequently focused on speed, convenience, and/or efficiency. Reporting benefits such as “quite often an immediate reply” and “flexible, read and respond when it is convenient to you” and “simple, clear, fast exchange of information” indicate the general theme. Furthermore, several respondents mentioned the ability to work when offices were closed as a positive aspect of CMC use.

Benefits of e-mail

The direct comparison of e-mail to telephone comprised the next category of benefits buyers described. A total of 15 buyers declared that they liked “no phone calls!”, or were happy that e-mail “reduces phone tag”, or replaced voice-mail. One respondent lauded the ability to do business without the need for individual conversations with every vendor bidding on a transaction, exhibiting the view that it is a clear benefit for the buyer to control the exchange of information. Ability to broadcast messages with newer electronic forms of communication earned praise from buyers, as did additional functionality such as “the ability to forward, attach documents, and communicate with vendors and co-workers all at once”. However, there is a wide range of exploration and use of the new tools taking place in various buyer-seller environments, as evidenced by one respondent who said the benefits of electronic communication are “no more than voice-mail”, offering a divergent view from those who noted the increased functionality available within electronic modes of communication.

Documentation

Electronic communication provides documentation, which was another benefit category noted in this study. Finally, eight buyers mentioned accuracy or more depth of information, but with a different frame than those who compared it directly to the telephone. These responses regarding the greatest benefits from using electronic communication were the ability to do research, to obtain data directly, and to obtain current information (e.g. model numbers, pricing).

Other relevant observations came from the 41 buyer responses to the third, open ended question. These were classified into two categories:

1. communicative/relationship issues; and
2. statements the buyers made regarding the current and future state of use of technology.

The first of these, communicative/relationship issues, included 27 responses. A minority of these reported electronic communication as a relationship benefit, while most reported difficulties the use of electronic communication might contribute to relationships. Illustrative of the responses, the following ideas were reported:

- “still prefer in person or written”;
- “should not replace personal contact”;
- “new business usually takes some other means of communication first”;
- “seller (actual person) is a key component”; and
- “good relationships have to be developed first”.

The matching of seller to buyer preferences was highlighted, as exemplified by this excerpt from a buyer response:

E-mail is an excellent communication option. Unfortunately most suppliers respond better to telephone communication.

Another respondent revealed:

I've made a lot of use of [electronic options communication for purchasing] and found them to be wonderfully helpful. But they involve no human salespeople, which sometimes is the best of all.

Buyer evaluations

While sellers may not view these buyer evaluations regarding communication alternatives to face-to-face or phone contacts positively, the individual preferences of a seller's customer base regarding communication options appears to be valuable to the relationship success.

The other category of buyer responses to the third survey question posed were related to buyers' views of the current state of technology and their views regarding future use of electronic communication modes. Most buyer responses within this category expressed expectations of tremendous future growth in the use of e-mail and other various forms of computer mediated communication. Expressive of the scope of change expected, responses included: "growing rapidly with vast changes" and "it will continue to explode". Only one respondent expressed the opinion that more "hype" existed than reality in the predictions for future use of CMC. All other responses in this category indicated expectations for increasing use of e-mail in purchasing tasks.

Personal touch

Sellers. When sellers were asked to describe challenges they face in using electronic communication in the sales process, responses were divided into the following primary categories: technical issues and relationship/communication issues. Those coded as technical issues included aspects of security, reliability, encouraging customers to use technology, maintaining current status with technology advancing rapidly, locating access to technology communication tools, each individual's own inexperience with technology, and lack of sales education in this realm. In addition, minor functional problems, such as slow viewing of pictures, were noted by sellers, along with major problems, such as system failures.

Relationship/communication issues expressed by sellers participating in the study included descriptions of e-mail use that classified e-mail as impersonal, less personal, or contributing to loss of personal contact with buyers. Illustrative responses expanded on the impersonal nature of the medium, citing its contribution to lack of control of customer purchases, inability to meet with prospects face-to-face and difficulties in interpreting emotion in the content of the messages. The responses that mention control reinforce this theme from the interview study. The lack of ability to include cues for emotion and the general sense of loss of personal touch align with information richness theory generally. Sellers are traditionally trained, and learn from experience, that a personal touch is critical to their success.

Benefits of using electronic communication were categorized into the following two primary categories:

1. efficiency; and
2. the ability to provide documentation of the information exchange.

A total of 83 percent of sellers espoused ease, speed and/or efficiency of electronic communication as a benefit. A total of ten sellers mentioned written records as a positive aspect of e-mail. The notions of ubiquitous accessibility and intrusion on the communication partner often appeared together as sources of tension within sellers' descriptions of their use of electronic communication. Together, they can also be viewed as jointly beneficial, as one seller explained:

Electronic communication has completely revolutionized our business. We are able to send a clear, concise message/question to the client without the message being so intrusive. If the client is out, the message can be retrieved through a laptop, people are more accessible.

In terms of providing documentation, similar to the interview study, one seller responded directly with this as a benefit of e-mail use: "CYA", and we know what that means in terms of a paper trail!

Sellers' experience

The third, open-ended question was intended to evoke other aspects of sellers' experience within their electronic communication with buyers. Relationship or communication issues surfaced in 69 percent of responses, while the balance included statements of the current state of affairs or expected future, which was similar to buyer responses to the question. Other responses primarily reflected and reiterated the sellers' desire to maintain personal contact with buyers. The consistent reporting by sellers that nothing replaces face-to-face communication dominated the data. Complexity and nuance concerning this issue came through, however, as one participant indicated:

... contacting customers too much can have the opposite effect that [*sic*] you are looking for.

Recognition that the Internet is changing marketplaces rapidly and challenging sellers to create innovative ways to attract customers was reported by the sellers. Development of business relationships was thought to be more difficult. This was poignantly described by one respondent:

I find the majority of prospects want to avoid personal contact with salespeople due to their time constraints. This makes it much more difficult to develop a relationship and clear understanding of how we can best be of service to them.

Expectations for current and future conditions are aptly expressed by the following excerpt of a seller's response:

I definitely see huge increases in the use of e-mail for the major companies. If you are supplying any of the major *Fortune* 500 companies with goods or services, you had better get Internet and e-mail savvy.

Interpretation of results

Customer loyalty

Pundits claim that e-mail can serve to effectively increase customer loyalty and create opportunities to generate additional business and referrals. One pharmaceutical sales example attributed sales force success to use of fax or e-mail information updates to customers on a weekly basis. Scholars have highlighted problems with e-mail and other forms of CMC within an organization (Stevens and McElhill, 2000; Romm and Pilskin, 1999). However, e-mail use and CMC generally within the buyer-seller relationship, which is so dependent upon communication, has not been fully explored.

Findings from this qualitative research can offer unique insight into complex settings, such as current communication environments for the buyer-seller relationship. The findings from these studies offer some support for information richness theory and align with findings from research into the use of e-mail in general business settings, such as the importance of urgency and availability of the communication partner in choosing a communication medium (Straub and Karahanna, 1998). In addition, the economic and efficiency aspects of CMC are supported. However, those efficiencies may have a price, at least for sellers that are grappling with loss of access to the buyer.

Complex issues

More complex issues arise in the realm of electronic communication use specific to the buyer-seller interface. Relationship issues including control and trust are highly relevant to buyers. Sellers face unique demands due to the mobile nature of their work, which creates a difficulty buyers usually do not experience; that is, the challenge of finding a place to connect to communication devices. This could be less problematic as wireless technology improves, as cellular telephone technology has shown in the voice communication arena. Sellers also have greater difficulty due to lack of technical support in the field when it comes to technical failures.

The notion that strategic uses of e-mail develop via recursive interplay between communication media and social structures offered regarding e-mail use by Phillips and Eisenberg (1996), surpasses other theories-in-use regarding application in the buyer-seller context. This pragmatic view incorporates a co-evolutionary stance toward three inter-related concepts: social structures (i.e. enduring relationships), technological tools, and purposeful or strategic actions. The current studies lend credence to the importance of purposeful action in the buying process having a strong influence on media choice decisions. While there is a stream of research devoted to understanding how managers make media choice decisions, the extant literature does not address difficulties that arise from choosing the wrong media for a particular message, a potentially important issue in buyer-seller relationships. Using a more complex and pragmatic view offers possibilities for exploring this further.

Negative aspect

Differences noted in the responses of buyers from those of sellers in this study indicate friction can arise within these business relationships with increased use of electronic communication. Sellers overwhelmingly note the ease, speed and convenience of electronic communication media, while viewing the limitation on their face-to-face and more “personal” contacts with buyers as a negative aspect that accompanies use of new media options. Buyers, on the other hand, were more likely than sellers in this survey to mention the inherent “paper trail” as positive. When buyers surveyed were interested in seeking vendors or information online, they appreciated data availability, ease in locating information, and rapid responses. Buyers often noted the elimination of meetings and telephone calls with vendors as a benefit.

Sellers’ responses did not mirror the buyers, although some common ground is apparent. Such conflicts and tensions are not necessarily new to the buyer-seller interface, but this research indicates they are complicated by the lack of clarity in fundamental relationship aspects of communication that surface as the norms and limits of CMC use continue to evolve in buyer-seller exchanges.

Recommendations for future research

As with all research, the current study has limitations. A good set of exploratory data was collected, however findings are discovery-orientated and not meant to be broadly generalizable. The need for comprehensive modeling of influence factors in buyer-seller media choice decisions remains. Future research examining buyer-seller dyads could be directed toward developing a deeper understanding of the importance of matching communication media use within the buyer-seller pair. How buyers and sellers rate the importance of the benefits and challenges they reported would be one quantification worthy of further pursuit. Furthermore, how different communication media selections are viewed by buyers and sellers in various phases of the purchase process could add depth to the findings reported in the current study. Finally, B2B buyers and sellers could also find such insights compelling them to examine their internal training and organizational policy issues regarding CMC, potentially guiding them to greater success in today’s marketing communication arena.

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