

Examining the importance of social media and other emerging ICTs in far distance internationalization: The case of a Western exporter entering China

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Abstract

We focus on the importance of digital social media for a European B2B firm entering the Chinese market. Our case company has achieved rapid international growth, including within the Chinese market. We find that social media has been an exceedingly important factor in this. The company, however, did not identify China's digital firewall, which blocks platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, as a major entry barrier. Most of the social media content is produced and published by others, and this is not traditional online product reviews or electronic word-of-mouth expressing viewpoints about the products. Indeed, the majority of content seems to be rather straightforward, simple videos of the products working. Thus, it is imperative to understand what motivates people and organizations to produce and publish these videos. New information and communication technology-based products and services represent major opportunities, and the Chinese market and its customers are evaluated as more open to new solutions than more conservative western countries.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that the internet and allied Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) largely facilitate enterprises' internationalization (Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson, 2011; Pezderka et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2013). By increasing the quality and speed of communication and transactions, and decreasing the associated costs, ICT advances have made internationalization more feasible, especially

for resource-constrained firms (Oviatt and McDougall, 2005; Reuber and Fischer, 2011; Sinkovics et al., 2013). Moreover, empirical studies like Zhang et al. (2008) suggest that information technology capabilities improve the export performance of small and medium-sized firms.

One particular, but highly relevant, type of ICT is digital social media (SM). Digital social media refers to computer mediated technologies that enable the creation and sharing of information, as exemplified by Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat, *inter alia*. Interaction and user-generated content are important elements of social media, in addition to the development of online social networks. From an international marketing perspective, social media creates a wide variety of opportunities, such as identifying customers, targeting marketing campaigns, creating new ways of interacting with customers. Social media has also created platforms where customers interact with each other and where products are evaluated, rated and commented on in different online forums (Alarcón et al., 2018).

While several studies have examined the use of social media as a revolutionary international marketing/promotion tool (Alarcón et al., 2015, 2018; Berthon et al., 2012; Maltby, 2012; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013), it is important to also focus on how other emerging ICT-related technologies are becoming increasingly important and popular. Such technologies include the Internet-of-Things (I-o-T), Augmented Reality (AR), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Big Data, and the Blockchain technologies. Indeed, each of these may drastically change product and service characteristics, business models, and market strategies of both manufacturing and service firms.

However, despite growing interest in the internet and ICTs and their potential for international-oriented companies (Jean et al., 2008; Loane et al., 2004; Mathews et al., 2016; Morgan-Thomas and Bridgewater, 2004; Petersen et al., 2002), current research on how businesses are using social media and other IC-related technologies from an internationalization perspective is still in its early stages. According to Alarcón-del-Amo et al. (2018, p. 265): *“...to date very limited attention has been paid to the relationship between social media adoption and international performance among exporting firms”*. Hence, better understanding is needed to determine whether the adoption of social media tools and other related digital technologies may have a significant impact in exporting companies, particularly ones that choose to enter culturally dissimilar markets.

In this chapter, we present an illustrative case study about how a focal Norwegian exporting firm is actively using social media and other related technologies to target the Chinese market. China is of particular interest as a foreign country context, since it represents a major emerging market for many

companies worldwide; It is also a geographically, institutionally, and culturally distant market from the perspective of European exporting firms (Fang et al., 2017; Ojala, 2009; Andersson et al., 2018). Indeed, cultural and language differences may impact the usage of social media as a key communication and interaction tool (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Several authors suggest that personal relations are more important in China than in Western cultures (Zhang et al., 2016), indicating that social media may be particularly important when doing business in China. Another characteristic of China is that major Western social media platforms including Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, as well as search engines such as Google, are blocked in mainland China. While access to content may be reached through VPN solutions, Chinese companies like WeChat and Youku offer alternatives to these platforms. Combined, these elements make China a particularly interesting case when examining the use of social media in export activities. Thus, we assess how other emerging ICT-related technologies may influence the key use of social media in China, from the perspective of key managers in the selected case company. Therefore, this chapter focuses on examining:

- a) The use of social media by a Norwegian exporting firm targeting the Chinese market.
- b) Current usage and reflections on the potential and impact of other ICT-related technologies with regard to export marketing, with particular attention to exporting to China.
- c) Reflections about how other ICT-related technologies may influence the role of social media in the future.

Given the lack of knowledge about the influence of social media usage on exporters' activities abroad, this research contributes the literature by providing a better understanding of the proactive use of social media and other related digital technologies by Western exporting firms, such as our Norwegian case firm, that seek to enter into foreign markets like China. The chapter is structured as follows: First, in the theoretical part, we focus on the relevant role that social media may play in a firm's international marketing strategy. Subsequently, we provide a brief introduction to emerging ICT-related technologies. Thereafter, used methods are explored and the case is presented and discussed.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Social media marketing research

The term *Social Media (SM)* has been defined by the literature as “*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content*” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media comprises

both the conduits and the content disseminated through interactions between individuals and organizations (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Social media employs mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms by which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. In addition, SM has introduced new customer-centric tools that enable customers to interact with others in their social networks and with businesses that become network members (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Accordingly, SM tools have the potential to provide greater access to customer information, either directly through firm-customer interactions or indirectly through customer-customer interactions, ultimately allowing for a faster, lower cost, and more highly efficient exchange of information (Agnihotri et al., 2012; Schniederjans et al., 2013).

While SM has increased the amount of information available regarding products, services and commercial outlets accessible to consumers, it also affects the nature and dissemination modes of marketing information (Shin et al., 2015). While marketing information was traditionally generated by corporations and channelled to markets through one-way mass media, or traditional direct media channels, the SM-based product, brand and company information are used, generated and transmitted through personal social networks, blogs, online communities, customer forums, etc. Therefore, and most importantly, the information exchanged regarding products or services are often beyond the control of marketers, in the form of product reviews, recommendations to other customers, remarks about improvements and even advice for use. There is evidence that customer-generated information in the online environment plays an increasingly important role in the consumers' decision-making process, since this information is usually perceived as more reliable and unbiased (Constantinides et al., 2008).

Therefore, SM has enabled users to move from being simply consumers to being producers and creators as well. The user is the centre of the information flow, but also the key actor in terms of content generation. Blogs, chats, newsgroups and social networking sites promote a greater degree of user participation. This interaction has major commercial implications, as the consumers themselves have an increasing influence on products and the strategies used to sell them (Riegner, 2007). The SM domain has become an important tool of interactive marketing, and commercial budgets for SM marketing are growing at the expense of other forms of interactive and traditional marketing (Alarcón et al., 2018). Consequently, over the last several years there has been an explosion in the number of SM applications adopted by businesses.

Academic research into SM has primarily focused on its impact on corporate processes (Shin et al., 2015; Stolley, 2009), on the importance of online communities for corporations (Kolbitsch and Maurer, 2007),

or on issues regarding the effects of these new technologies on businesses (Deshpande and Jadad, 2006). Several studies even suggest that corporate interest in the SM domain continues to grow, and more and more firms are introducing different forms of SM into their daily business routines, as well as into their marketing and operational strategies (Constantinides et al., 2008; Bernoff and Li, 2008). However, few studies have come to any definitive conclusions about how corporations can integrate SM applications into their operations (DeFelice, 2006).

Social media and export marketing behaviour

In general, ICT developments have strengthened international business relations by increasing the efficiency of market transactions and by promoting a faster and easier access to information. Based upon the key role of the internet and SM in improving communication with relevant players abroad (providers, distributors, and customers), exporting firms can increase their benefits by significantly reducing psychic distance and communication costs through managing customer relationships, distribution channels and intermediaries, sales transactions, and fulfilment activities in international markets (Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson, 2011; Pezderka et al., 2012; Yamin and Sinkovics, 2006; Zhang et al., 2013; Trainor et al., 2014). Furthermore, consumers are increasingly using the internet and SM to communicate with each other and to forge and sustain relationships between themselves and the firms with which they conduct business (Sinkovics and Penz, 2005).

While the globalization of business processes offers substantial growth in opportunities, companies must still overcome the challenges of geographical, institutional, and cultural distance. In a sense, firms selling their products in increasingly distant foreign markets face even more difficulties in performing their activities, due to the fact that they are operating in unknown environments, which increases the level of risk and uncertainty. In this context, SM may help break down the barriers of time and distance between the supply and the demand (Constantinides et al., 2008). Thus, SM applications can be a technical solution for overcoming market distance (Diviné et al., 2011).

When considering SM usage and its connection to firm export-based internationalization, it is important to note that several authors have highlighted the potential influence of a firm's SM usage on international business and export marketing strategies (Alarcón et al., 2015, 2018; Arnone and Deprince, 2016; Bell and Loane, 2010; Berthon et al., 2012; Maltby, 2012; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013; Reuber and Fischer, 2011).

Bell and Loane (2010), in particular, have noted that small global companies are using Web 2.0 technologies to intensify their relationships with international partners. They further demonstrated that, for international companies, SM is a key driver of business development and rapid internationalization, since these new-wave firms leverage value through close collaboration with other firms and co-creation with customers.

According to Okazaki and Taylor (2013), SM may create value in the context of international activity, because the global reach of social networking platforms such as Facebook, Google+, Twitter or LinkedIn, combined with their important degree of standardization, make them effective leverages for international marketing strategies. For these authors, digital SM provides international marketers with new opportunities to reach consumers across the globe by means of generating networking capability, image transferability, and personal extensibility, and thus facilitating interaction across geographic and psychological boundaries.

Social media usage may also accelerate the internationalization of start-ups from their inception (Maltby, 2012). Online technologies can provide companies with relevant information to enable them to discover, evaluate, and exploit international opportunities better and faster than their competitors. Exporters can implement business intelligence practices that (through the integration of web applications with back-end databases and systems), in order to customize the online experience for their clients, are recognized as important factors for the successful pursuit of international opportunities (Reuber and Fischer, 2011).

The explosive growth of SM has enabled companies—often, new ventures and SMEs—to connect with people and locations all over the world (Berthon et al., 2012; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). In addition, SM may help firms reinforce their international business operations particularly by improving international communication, the efficiency of market transactions, the satisfaction and loyalty of foreign customers, and the development of international network relationships (Alarcón et al., 2015). Arnone and Deprince (2016) have recently observed that SM largely facilitates the creation and development of relationships among international partners, such as customers, distributors, and importers, as well as eases the access of small companies to new business opportunities in foreign markets. According to these authors, companies may use the huge linking potential of SM to strengthen their business relationships, reduce psychic distance, and facilitate players' relationships.

Therefore, ICTs in general, and SM technologies in particular, are potentially relevant for conducting international activities worldwide, as these technologies may drastically improve communication with foreign customers and ultimately, reduce or even eliminate physical or cultural distances. By adopting

SM strategies, companies improve their ability to take advantage of international market-growth opportunities (Mathews et al., 2012; Mathews et al., 2016), with unique implications for improving international marketing strategies and performance (Berthon et al., 2012; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). Accordingly, many exporting firms are increasingly integrating digital SM strategies into their export marketing programs to acquire first-hand information about their customers that allows them to develop export marketing strategies that best fit with the needs and desires of their clients worldwide.

Other emerging IC-related technologies

This section presents other emerging ICTs that are already available or still in their earliest development phases by B2C or B2B firms.

The *Internet-of-things (I-o-T)* refers to identifiable items with electronics, software, sensors, and connectivity that enable firms to connect and exchange data. Current estimates of I-o-T items ranges between 5 and 15 billion objects, and rapid growth is expected. Short-range wireless technology developments enable an increasing number of I-o-T objects to be implemented, for example, in Smart Homes, infrastructure management systems, manufacturing processes, and monitoring systems. In relation to international marketing, one key consequence of I-o-T is the ability to monitor usage patterns, location, and maintenance status for many types of products. However, development of new services and product attributes, as well as new forms of interaction with customers, is also part of the I-o-T driven change processes.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is the ability of computers or computer-controlled robots to perform intellectual processes such as reasoning, discovering meaning, generalizing and learning from experience. In short, it essentially refers to computers functioning intellectually in a manner that is increasingly similar to human beings.

The *Blockchain* technology is most known for the role it played in the creation of Bitcoins and other cryptocurrencies. It is a distributed ledger that stores information in blocks that are linked together, providing a history of transactions verified by participants. Swan (2015) describes it as revolutionary, with an emerging new, digital, and decentralized sharing economy. Other authors have called the Blockchain technology disruptive, with the potential to radically change business models and processes. The so-called smart contracts are self-executing contracts aimed at automatically facilitating exchanges based on predefined terms in Blockchain-based agreements, thus reducing costs and the need for trusted third parties. From the perspective of international marketing, issues related to Blockchain

technology include the role of intermediates in the future and how the verified history of individuals, companies, and products may have significant implications.

Augmented reality refers to a live view of a real-life environment, where parts/objects are added, removed, or changed, in an interactive visual-world setting. In augmented reality, the digital view may be shared across devices and distance. Head-mounted displays, head-up displays, eyeglasses, and mobile phones are examples of display devices. It is expected that some of the most important industrial usage areas of augmented reality are in maintenance and repair, as well as in distance training.

Finally, *Big Data* is a term used for referring to the large datasets generated from sources, such as Internet-of-Things sensor systems, SM platforms, and internet usage or medical devices.

In summary, advances in the area of ICT have changed the way both people and firms live, as well as the marketing practice. Each of these technologies or tools may present huge opportunities and/or challenges for domestic and international marketers. Moreover, a combination of any of these technologies may pose even more challenges, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Method

To understand how companies adopt and use ICTs and related digital tools when targeting a culturally distant market, such as in China, we conducted a longitudinal, exploratory single-case study (Yin, 1998, 2009). We chose an exploratory case-based approach because case studies make it possible to explore and describe empirical data and events in a real-life environment and further, because it allowed us to gain a broad and rich understanding of an understudied phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The single case study method is also useful in revealing aspects of a phenomenon that have, thus far, been largely inaccessible (Yin 2009) and in better understanding longitudinal organizational processes (Doz, 2011; Langley et al., 2013).

According to Eisenhardt (1989), selecting a case/s is crucial when employing this research method. Limiting the number of cases increases the possibility of obtaining deeper and more detailed information (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Nummela et al., 2014), which we view as crucial, given the purpose of the study. Indeed, limiting our attention to just one focal firm (Yin, 2009) allowed us to build very close relationships with key company informants and thus, gain access to the information that we needed (Welch et al., 2002).

We chose Omega, a manufacturing exporting firm from Norway that specializes in producing and selling innovative machinery for agriculture and industry. To investigate the role played by a number of ICTs in a context of high uncertainty due to large cultural distance with the home market, we focused on the company's export entry and expansion into the Chinese market. It is important to note that Omega is not the firm's real name; We use the name Omega for this case company based on a confidentiality agreement with the company's managers which does not allow us to use the correct, searchable name of the company.

With regard to data collection, an industry/university research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council with the aim of increasing the company's international competitiveness established close contacts between the researchers from a Norwegian university and a research foundation and the company managers for the period 2015-2018. This allowed us open access to information related to the firm's operations and internationalization, which in turn allowed us to collect data in a variety of different ways and thus, gain in-depth knowledge into the company and its marketing efforts in domestic and foreign markets and focused activity areas. Table 1 provides an overview of the different contacts established between the researchers and the company's representatives in the covered period of analysis.

Table 1. Overview of total key contact elements during February 2015-January 2018 (36 months)

| Contact element | Participants | Frequency | Total |
|--|--|---------------|------------|
| Project coordination meetings | Project group; companies and researchers | 1-2 per month | ca. 30 |
| Steering group meetings | Steering group with one representative from each partner | 2-3 per year | 7 |
| Contact by e-mail or phone | 1-n communication | 5-10 per week | About 1150 |
| Workshops and meetings in working groups | Members of the working group – company representatives and researchers | 2-4 per month | About 40 |
| Meetings - seminars and courses | Researchers and company representatives, internal or external | 3-5 per year | About 15 |
| Factory and field visits | Researchers and company representatives, internal or external | 2-4 per year | About 10 |

Examples of data collection activities included several interviews with the key managers and international distributors of the company (focusing on improvement areas from a customer perspective), analysis of international market opportunities and the development of decision tools for aiding foreign market selection. Several seminars, which focused on the role of the top management team in managing international market activities and growth strategies, were also conducted. For the purpose of this research, when making arrangements for conducting the interviews and seminars, specific requests were made to especially involve the managers of the focal organization, which were considered the most knowledgeable of its entry and expansion into the Chinese market. All of these forms of contact, most of which focused on international marketing issues, were duly triangulated with other sources of information, which resulted in:

- a) Two researchers conducted a one-hour semi-structured personal interview with the company's CEO that focused on the major international marketing decisions for the company during the past 10 years (tape recorded).
- b) One one-hour interview by a master student that specifically focused on examining the Chinese market activities, including both the company's CEO and the sales director (tape recorded).
- c) An open discussion meeting with the product development manager and production manager regarding the usage of other technologies by the firm, including Internet-of-Things, Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, and Augmented Reality (meeting notes).
- d) Members in our research team also participated in a meeting with a supplier of I-o-T solutions and Omega to discuss business model development and market potential of different solutions (meeting notes).
- e) Finally, one researcher held a one-hour personal meeting with the sales manager to discuss how Omega had used SM tools when entering the Chinese market and perspectives related to other technologies (tape recorded).

Therefore, to avoid personal recall or retrospective bias, to triangulate the information, and to gain the most relevant insights on each topic (Huber and Power, 1985), we interviewed different individuals from managerial levels within the firm. An electronic recorder was used to record all that was said during the interviews, which facilitated their transcription. Although we used face-to-face interviews as the main source of information, telephone and email communication were also used to clarify any inconsistencies within the interviews whenever necessary. Moreover, we also used secondary data gathered from the

case firm to validate and triangulate the interview data (Miles et al., 2013). In particular, we were given access to internal data related to SM usage by the firm, including website access, YouTube statistics and search engine information. Overall, we gained a significant amount of knowledge by following the firm for several years, combined with the information gathered from in-depth interviews that focused on ICT-related technology usage and the Chinese market.

In the case data analysis phase, we followed the guidelines of Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), and sought to convey the empirical evidence in as faithful a manner as possible. We wrote down the case story, with supporting quotations, as a longitudinal narrative. Thereafter, we used the tables developed during the data-coding phase, together with the case narrative, to link empirical evidence to the emerging theory.

Several quality criteria for conducting qualitative and case-based research were followed (Beverland and Lindgren. 2010; Yin. 2009). Validity was increased by the triangulation of several respondents with regard to the focal case and with secondary firm data, and reports were sent after each interview to the key interviewees (product development manager, CEO, and sales director) for their approval and feedback. Reliability was increased by the use of a field research protocol and a company dataset.

Findings

Case presentation

Omega was established in 1949 and is a manufacturer of agricultural machinery. Omega's machines produce highly compressed bales of different materials, mainly maize, but also other agricultural products and industrial waste. Increased ability to preserve animal forage quality, reduced need of storage space and easier mode of transportation are the main advantages this company offers to its customers. They export more than 95% of their machine production to 40+ different countries. The company may be described as following a niche-focus strategy, with a highly differentiated and unique product; In almost every international market it is positioned as a high-end and high-price company. In the past 4-5 years Omega has experienced significant international growth.

In the last 2-3 years, China has become the most important export market for Omega. The company's market share in China is between 15-20% and it has approximately 10 competitors, most of which are Chinese but one other European exporter is active in the Chinese market as well.

The company began exporting to China when a Chinese company requested a US/Chinese company for a specific production solution. This US/Chinese firm had knowledge of Omega's product range and technology through SM tools, such as Facebook and YouTube, and from agricultural exhibitions. As a result, a relationship between the Chinese firm and Omega was established. While at first this Chinese firm was only a customer, it rapidly developed into an importer of Omega products as well. Currently, approximately 5-7 importers/distributors sell Omega machinery in China, often in close interaction with Omega, and there are also some direct sales. Moreover, approximately 10-15 machinery companies have expressed interest in becoming dealers. Currently, Omega's managers are discussing how to design its representation structure in the Chinese market, including the possibility of establishing a sales office and/or production facilities. It should be noted that one of these importers found YouTube videos about the company and, as a result, contacted Omega and expressed their interest in importing the company's products to China. Furthermore, Omega actively uses a public export promoting agency, called Innovation Norway, which also operates in China, to facilitate the company's entry into the Chinese market.

Social media

According to Omega's sales director, *"Social media has not been important in our international expansion, it has been extremely important"*; and he has indicated that this also refers to the Chinese market. Indeed, he continued on to say: *"we have only begun to scrape the very surface of the opportunities for digital marketing in China"*. In the following, we present the different SM channels used by Omega in entering the Chinese market.

The company has one Facebook site for Norway and another for international activities. Each of these has between 4000-6000 likes. Different news is presented, exemplified with new products, new representatives, sales initiatives or awards given to technological solutions. In addition, there is a company fan page that provides news about the products, videos, and other elements. However, this page has a lower number of followers. The inability to control the content on this particular Facebook site which promotes the company has not yet been an issue, but may represent challenges going forward depending on how its content continues to develop.

Facebook-based initiated contacts have also resulted in company sales. For example, Omega received a request through Facebook Messenger, which said: *"Hello, this is Sophie from China"*. A couple of weeks later, and after communicating with Sophie through Messenger and WeChat, a contract for three machines was signed.

WeChat reached 1 billion users recently and is growing rapidly. It is regarded as an important app in China, and a competitor to WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Indeed, since WhatsApp and Facebook are blocked by the Chinese government WeChat is crucial when interacting with Chinese partners. It seems, however, that most contacts in China also have access to and use the officially blocked channels. However, Omega uses WeChat to communicate with representatives and customers in China.

With the exemption of direct communication through WeChat, Omega has not actively used the Chinese alternatives to Facebook. The WeChat group interaction solution has been used by distributors in China primarily to post Omega's product videos and to communicate and interact with existing and potential customers. Due to the significant language and cultural differences, Omega is not involved in these other group/forum activities in China.

As for video-related content, YouTube videos related to the company's products each have between 1,900,000 and 2,000,000 views. Videos that illustrate how the products are used tend to do especially well, as they make it possible to visually understand how these products actually perform. The company has its own major YouTube channel: it has posted 30 videos and has received 230,000 total views. However, due to the fact that YouTube is blocked in China and Chinese users can only watch videos using a VPN solution, the number of views that Omega receives from China is difficult to estimate.

Table 2 summarises the five most viewed YouTube videos posted directly by the company and also by others (influencers). We include information about when they were posted, number of views, and if there is advertising. However, it is difficult to identify all Omega-related videos, as there are many videos published that focus on the company's products, ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand views. We did use the company name and the name of the two most important product models and combinations of these search elements to develop the provided list.

As table 2 illustrates, many of the most viewed videos are part of channels that specialize in videos with agricultural machinery and equipment, most of these financed by channel advertising. In addition, there are more than 100 videos, typically with between 500 and 15,000 views that present the products in operation. Most of these have no written comments or spoken content in the video, just the video itself with perhaps added music. Viewers may write comments and establish discussions on the company's YouTube channel and, in some cases, there are more than 100 such user-generated comments. In total, 80-85% of the products' YouTube views are related to content produced and published by others and not directly by the company. It should also be noted that the view growth rates are considerably higher for the videos published by others. The most viewed video's views increase by roughly 1,000 each day.

One major advantage of the internally produced and presented videos by the company is the possibility to analyse viewer statistics. Omega has not extensively used advertising on SM platforms; the sales director explains: *“We have not made any Facebook or YouTube advertising campaigns specifically targeting the Chinese market, while in other selected markets we have organized limited Facebook advertising and the response is promising”*.

Table 2. YouTube videos about Omega’s offer range

| YouTube videos posted by the company | | | |
|---|--------------------|--|----------------------|
| Views | When posted | Comment | Advertisement |
| 362 000 | May 2012 | Product presentation video. Text in video. | No |
| 53 000 | July 2009 | Product presentation video. Text in video. | No |
| 47 500 | July 2009 | Product presentation video. Text in video. | No |
| 39 400 | July 2009 | Product presentation video. Text in video. | No |
| 18 400 | Jan 2016 | Product presentation video. No text or comments. | No |
| YouTube videos posted by others | | | |
| Views | When posted | Comment | Advertisement |
| 999 000 | Nov 2015 | English/Dutch agricultural machinery channel. Text in video. | Yes |
| 79 900 | Sept 2015 | Individual with English/Italian agricultural machinery and games channel. No text or comments. | Yes |
| 61 300 | Oct 2014 | English/Dutch agricultural channel. No text or comments. | Yes |
| 48 200 | June 2010 | Italian agricultural organization channel. No text or comments. | No |
| 21 000 | Dec 2014 | Individual hobby channel focusing on agricultural machinery. No text or comments. | Yes |

Youku, the largest online video presenter in China, gets roughly 23.6 billion monthly views, and can be considered a direct competitor or alternative to YouTube within the Eastern market. On the Youku platform, Omega has downloaded 20-25 product videos. The number of views for each is less than 1,000,

indicating a very limited impact of Youku-based communication for the company thus far. Omega has not downloaded videos to the other Chinese video systems which are also alternatives to YouTube.

In general, however, it is evident that YouTube is relevant for Omega when targeting the Chinese market, as it appears to be possible for Chinese citizens to access and watch the company's videos even though the site is officially blocked in China.

Press coverage

Omega uses press coverage actively with the aim of promoting the company's image and products, such as from local news stations, national Norwegian news outlets, and international TV and newspapers. Also, news of innovation and product-related awards received by the company at several agricultural exhibitions and trade fairs is distributed to different news outlets and mentioned on SM.

In 2017, one of the company's key managers visited China along with the Norwegian prime minister, several other ministers, and a group of managers of other exporting companies. They had meetings and different seminars with Chinese officials and businesses. As a result, TV news stations in China featured Omega machines and the company in general. According to the company's sales director, *"Of course it is helpful with pictures of our CEO together with the Norwegian prime minister and high-ranking Chinese officials"*. Such initiatives are used to build a profile, brand reputation, and knowledge about the company. One of Omega's Chinese importers was part of a TV program demonstrating increased quality in conservation of hay in bales, and focused partly on Omega products and product advantages.

As much as possible, internally and externally generated news are also presented on the company's Facebook accounts and on the company home page. One example of news coverage is an interview with one of the company's manager about Omega's main product, which was downloaded to YouTube by the organizer of an agricultural exhibition and lately posted on the exhibition's YouTube channel and Facebook page. This illustrates how news coverage is increasingly being related to SM channels.

Other SM channels, like Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram, have not been used by the company thus far. They do not have any previous experience with these channels, and do not have any current plans to become active on them. Of course, e-mail is widely used for direct written communication with distributors, customers, and potential customers – also those in China.

Omega has a Norwegian internet homepage, as well as an English one, and they are currently working on developing home pages in other languages in an attempt to adapt the homepage to the language of the

country in which visitors are located. Having a professional home page system is regarded as an important promotional asset by the company's representatives, as customers will most likely use the home page to search for information about the company and its products.

Other IC-related technologies

Internet-of-things, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data are three highly interrelated aspects. Omega has recently included online communication opportunities in their agricultural machines, as well as developed RFID (radio-frequency identification) chips on the produced bales. In addition, an app mapping machine location, usage hours, production volumes, and other machine parameters are in the final development and testing stage. This will make it possible for machine users and owners to have a visual representation of key machine statistics on their mobile phones. Overall, these elements enable customers to remotely monitor the machines and gather information about the produced bales. Different sensors may be added and large data sets generated and potentially analysed based on artificial intelligence and the introduction of machine learning systems. Following an open innovation approach, the company's product development manager stated that, *"Tomorrow, I will present our connectivity solution as speaker on an agriculture trade fair, and I will invite all participants with relevant technology in towards processes adding sensors or devices to our products"*.

Omega, however, has not yet considered opportunities related to Blockchain technology. Preliminary assessments suggest that the RFID-technology now implanted in all the bales produced by their machines may be interesting from a Blockchain perspective. Currently, many solutions focused on product verification and history are being developed such as, for example, Walmart's system of tracking package contents, environmental conditions, location, and other details as described by Guiterres (2017).

Moreover, Omega is currently testing Augmented Reality (AR) solutions. They are exploring options related to iPads or different types of glasses, and considering user training as well as other service and support possibilities. However, the extent to which this technology may be applied towards the Chinese market has not yet been evaluated.

Discussion

In this section, we comment first on some of the most interesting and important elements communicated by Omega in the different interviews held with company representatives with regard to the use of SM by a Western firm entering the Chinese market. Thereafter, we focus on the two other major questions mentioned in the introduction: the role of other ITCs and future ideas about how the interaction between SM usage and other technologies may develop.

Social media and international growth

According to earlier research, SM appears to play an increasingly important role in export marketing management and export performance for Western firms (Alarcón et al., 2015, 2018; Berthon et al., 2012). Musteen et al. (2010), for example, indicate that firms which share a common language with foreign connections can internationalize faster than those that do not. Therefore, the usage of digital social networks sites by firms allows them to accelerate the internationalization process by developing a common language with their international ties. Our results clearly support the notion that SM increases the ability of SMEs to exploit international market opportunities, as stated also by Ibeh and Kasem (2011) and Mathews et al. (2012).

Generally speaking, SM tools have been of critical importance in promoting the international growth experienced by Omega, and especially with regard to their entry into the Chinese market. Each machine sold by Omega costs between \$125,000–175,000 USD, and yet they have sold such expensive machines as a result of SM exposure, not only in China, but in other countries as well. YouTube and Facebook seem to have been especially useful for achieving Omega's targets in this regard. Additionally, while Omega also sells products through distributors, the company receives requests from possible customers, which result in direct sales or sales in cooperation with distributors. The company has internal statistics and target goals for the number of product requests and the percentage of these that should result in actual sales. From 2016 to 2017, the percentage of such contacts made directly to Omega from potential customers increased by roughly 20%. The increase in the number of requests from China alone was 100%. Most of these originated from SM, where potential customers had seen videos or found some kind of online information about the products and company.

It is especially interesting to consider the SM video content and users' motivation for posting. It is generally accepted that online product reviews can influence sales (Moen et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2010), but the SM content related to Omega's products are not product reviews. Indeed, the YouTube videos linked to Omega's products offer neither positive nor negative statements but rather, simply

show the machines in operation. While there may be comments and questions from the viewers in the comments section below the videos, the number is small.

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has been defined as *“a positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”* (Hennig et al., 2004, p. 39). What we have observed in the Omega case study is a type of neutral electronic word of mouth that lacks any positive/negative dimension. Many of the users who post Omega product videos allow for advertising and thus, receive some kind of profit, and the videos seem to originate from people with an almost hobby-like interest in agricultural machinery.

Technological barriers in China

The Great Firewall of China blocks large SM platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, which differentiates the Chinese market from most other domestic and foreign markets in which Omega operates. From Omega’s point of view, these differences have three key consequences: a) There is a total lack of information about how many possible customers in China are using proxies/VPN solutions to access YouTube videos and Facebook information about Omega; b) Advanced statistical analyses in terms of viewing patterns, geographical segmentation possibilities, and the more sophisticated analytical tools available in other platforms are not easily available and c) the company faces a number of key challenges when using the Chinese digital alternatives due to language differences.

From a business perspective, the blocking of major SM platforms in mainland China is a trade barrier that essentially limits access to the Chinese market. With regard to Omega, the most significant effect of this firewall is the lack of easy access to statistical information about users and viewing/interaction patterns. As expressed by the sales director *“We get less information based on SM platforms in China than in other markets, but we do have the number of requests from customers, and this is the most important measure we have”*. Therefore, at least with regard to Omega, China’s firewall has not reduced the importance of SM, as the company managers do not regard the Chinese blocking of Western SM platforms as limiting their ability to target the Chinese market in any way.

Country specificity of social media adaptation, usage and buying behaviour

According to our case analysis, SM adaptation and associated buying behaviour is different in China than in European markets. In most other countries, according to what has been experienced by Omega, distributors that handle company relations tend to be a male, while in China, younger, highly educated

women with good English language skills are a more important group of contacts for this firm. Overall, they tend to be less conservative than in Western countries, and search for opportunities and alternative solutions when necessary. As stated by the firm's sales director: *"These young, highly educated women have social media totally integrated as a part of their lifestyle. We should not be surprised that they communicate and make work related decisions based almost totally on social media usage"*. A sense of innovativeness, change orientation, and flexibility are key attributes of the Chinese market, according to the firm. While these attributes create new opportunities, they also engender the need for Omega to adjust its activities to handle such market innovativeness. As expressed by the sales director, *"I get the feeling that in China, cash and payment cards are regarded as outdated, mobile pay solutions are everyday life. I am not surprised when even the old lady selling strawberries at the street market use QR codes scanning and mobile pay"*.

As a consequence, new technological solutions may be easier to introduce in China than in more mature and conservative Western markets. This may result in higher learning opportunities in China, based on the existence of a higher number of early adopters for alternative digital solutions than in many other geographically closer markets.

The high number of YouTube videos produced and published by others (influencers) are important elements in the total international expansion of Omega, as these videos contribute to building brand awareness and product attention. There is, however, no clear indication of extensive YouTube or Facebook content originating from China. With regard to the Chinese alternatives, there is almost no visible effect of independent initiatives and third-party actions resulting in SM promotion for the company. Within the WeChat group solution, some degree of interaction does exist and content is generated as a result, but this does not have a wide dissemination effect. According to Omega's managers, while actors than the company itself are self-producing and presenting most of Omega's product-related SM content, this is not yet the case in China. Accordingly, this is a relevant difference compared to other markets, and it is uncertain if this situation will change or remain a distinguishing factor in China.

Other emerging IC-related technologies: changing business models and creating a larger impact of social media.

A large portion of evidence from our single case study indicates that new ICTs may drastically change current business models. In this regard, Omega's sales director has stated: *"We may not be able to find the best path through meetings and internal discussions at home, we should test and learn directly in the*

market". For example, verified information about each produced bale represents a major opportunity, but it may also challenge the current business model, since customers will own the machines and the bales produced, eliminating Omega's role. As a result, the company is discussing shifting its focus to the content of the data that the machines are able to generate, how the large datasets should be handled and analysed, and how all of this may be transferred to new services and business models. Thus, they are actively considering the different roles which the company could play in the future that diverge from present practices. As exemplified by Goodwin (2015): *"Uber, the world's largest taxi company, owns no vehicles. Facebook, the world's most popular media owner, creates no content. Alibaba, the most valuable retailer, has no inventory. And Airbnb, the world's largest accommodation provider, owns no real estate"*. Each year, machines delivered by Omega produce millions of bales that are stored, transported, sold and resold – often ending as animal fodder. These bales, and information about them based on new technology, represent a major opportunity for future revenues, as expressed by the sales director: *"If we are able to combine the new technological elements with new matching business models, the opportunities are enormous"*. He further continued: *"Internet-of things, AI and Big Data will definitely change our business model, but we still don't know how it will change"*. With regard to the innovative characteristics of Chinese customers, the sales director has stated: *"We think the Chinese customers are open to new ways of doing business, much more open than most customers in nearer western countries"*. As a result, it may be easier for the firm to develop more radical business concepts in China than in more mature markets.

Furthermore, the ability to remain flexible and pursue new opportunities with suppliers and actively engage with various partners was described as important. When Omega's product development managers invite other companies to be part of a new product development, this further represents the company's shift toward an open innovation strategy.

Finally, regarding the extent to which new ICTs might influence the future role of SM, the company representatives agree that it can be expected that any new product characteristic, any new functionality, any innovation added may gain interest and be widely presented by others on the internet and on SM. News stories, innovation, and awards could all help the company gain more attention and appeal more to customers. As a consequence, the implementation of new ICTs may not only increase firm competitiveness, but also be actively used to promote brand reputation and product awareness in combination with SM platforms.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

From a theoretical perspective, the resource based view as described by Barney (1991) focus the firm's internal resources and how these may be organized for competitive advantage while Teece et al. (1997) present dynamic capabilities as the firm's ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competences to address changes in the environment. User generated SM content is not internal resources of a firm, it is also difficult to integrate or reconfigure content produced and presented by individuals or organizations without linkages or transactions with the firm in its activities. This represent an important challenge for managers and for theoretical development: How may a firm integrate and use activity they do not influence or control in its international marketing strategy? Looking at online consumer reviews, the existence of providers offering fake reviews is well known, threats of negative reviews may in some cases be regarded as blackmailing and firm's like political parties may be the target of organized negative SM campaigns. In further research, there is a need to focus how to understand the role of SM within or related to widely used theories as the resource based view of the firm presented by Barney (1991) and dynamic capabilities as described by Teece et al. (1997).

It is not surprising that the majority of SM content is generated outside the firm. However, the actual content of it is surprising. The SM content for Omega's products are not traditional eWOM, consisting of positive or negative evaluations, neither is it a type of online product reviews. Rather, almost everything published be outside sources simply contain video footage of the machines in operation. The motivation for creating such content may partially be due to the revenue acquired from YouTube advertisements; It may also partly be simply the result of individuals having a strong interest in agricultural machinery. For both managers and researchers, this phenomenon inspires several important questions that need to be answered: Why would someone produce and publish these videos? What is their motivation? How do they choose which videos to make? Who is actually viewing the videos? Particularly related to China, it would also be interesting to determine why so few user generated videos are produced and published.

Answering these questions will increase the potential of new, emerging ICTs. If new solutions are developed that trigger the interest of SM content generators, they will be motivated to contribute to market knowledge about new products and solutions through SM.

Our results support the notion that SM is increasingly important in the context of international marketing, not only towards consumer markets, but also B2B markets. The global reach potential described by Okazaki and Taylor (2013) and the reduced importance of market distance discussed by

Divine et al. (2011) and Constantinides et al. (2008) have also been identified within our case study. The description of SM as extremely important, even though also stating that the company only has barely begun to use the potential of SM indicate significant opportunities in international markets for small and medium sized firms.

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