The adoption of marketing automation technology in the B2B sector:

Identifying organizational challenges in the adoption process and how to overcome them

Joel Järvinen\textsuperscript{1}
Miira Leinonen\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}Corresponding author
University Teacher
School of Business and Economics
University of Jyväskylä
PO Box 35
FIN-40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland
Tel. +358 (0)40 805 3542
Fax +358 (0)14 260 2021
E-mail: joel.jarvinen@jyu.fi

\textsuperscript{2}M.Sc. (Econ.)
School of Business and Economics
University of Jyväskylä
PO Box 35
FIN-40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland
E-mail: leinonen.miira@gmail.com
Abstract

Marketing automation refers to the automatic personalization of marketing activities (Heimbach, Kostyra, & Hinz, 2015). The automatic personalization is based on customer characteristics and/or behavior and performed via a Marketing Automation (MA) technology (Järvinen & Taïminen, 2016). Specifically, MA is a software platform that utilizes a customer database and delivers tailored interactive marketing activities that are triggered by predefined rules set by its users. Arguably, MA enables firms to target customers with relevant content for their individualistic needs at the right time of their purchasing journeys, which is likely to improve the effectiveness of marketing activities.

Van Rijn’s (2017) extensive collection of MA statistics sourced from different industry reports demonstrates the growing interest in MA technologies in the B2B sector. The statistics suggest that over 50% of B2B companies are adopting MA technologies, but few companies gain major benefits from their usage. Even some of the MA vendors admit that a large proportion of MA investments fail (e.g., HubSpot, 2017). The challenges in the adoption of other marketing and sales technologies such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Sales Force Automation (SFA) have been widely studied in the marketing literature. However, it is unclear to what extent the adoption of MA is associated with similar challenges documented in the CRM and SFA literature, and what the unique aspects in the adoption of MA are.

Against this backdrop, the goal of this study is to increase our understanding of the adoption process of MA technologies in B2B firms. By in-depth investigation of impediments and facilitators in the adoption process, the study aims at building a framework of organizational
factors that affect the benefits gained from the adoption of MA. To meet the study goal, we adopt a qualitative research strategy consisting of three distinctive studies. Table 1 summarizes the method, target organizations and primary data of each study.

Table 1: The outline of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Study 1 (completed)</th>
<th>Study 2 (completed)</th>
<th>Study 3 (in process)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target organization</td>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>Action research / longitudinal case study</td>
<td>Interview study</td>
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<tr>
<td>Large-sized B2B company (manufacturing industrial goods)</td>
<td>Small-sized B2B start-up company (providing technological services)</td>
<td>Ten B2B companies from different industries and ten expert agencies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary data</td>
<td>Interviews (n=6)</td>
<td>Observations over a period of 10 months + interviews (n=18)</td>
<td>Interviews (approx. n=20)</td>
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The preliminary results (based on studies 1 & 2) demonstrate notable misconceptions and unrealistic expectations related to the adoption of MA. The term ‘automation’ misguides marketers to think that the MA technology would reduce the workload while generating more high-quality sales leads. On the contrary, the findings show that MA requires more human resources especially in the early phase of the adoption. Moreover, excessive sales orientation to the detriment of customer orientation leads to limited benefits – since the core idea of MA is to create value for customers through timely and relevant content, the successful use of MA requires in-depth understanding of customer needs and a well-designed content strategy that produces content that meet customer needs. The findings suggest that the adoption of MA requires a cultural transformation from selling toward helping customers to complete their goals.
To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that specifically focuses on the adoption of MA. The study contributes to the existing knowledge on the adoption of marketing and sales technologies by showing the similarities in the adoption of MA to CRM and SFA while revealing the unique characteristics of MA that need to be taken into account in order to succeed in the adoption process. Overall, since the idea of MA technologies is to personalize and thus improve the efficiency and effectiveness of interactive marketing through the use of a customer database, the study creates new knowledge regarding the role of MA as part of database and interactive marketing.

References


