

# How LinkedIn can Boost SMEs' Digital Marketing Strategies on International Markets: A Case Study of an Apulian Tech-Intensive Company

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**Abstract:** The use of digital marketing tools, especially social media, could support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. Business-to-business (B2B) SMEs have discovered the potential of social media in identifying new business opportunities and building quality business contacts especially in international settings. LinkedIn, in particular, seems to be a valuable tool for lead generation and networking, thanks to knowledge and insights coming from structured and unstructured data. Despite the growing interest in adopting LinkedIn for marketing purposes, a significant gap persists in terms of the benefits coming from the adoption of digital marketing within B2B firms and SMEs. To address this gap, this study aims to examine how a social network can support a SME's internationalisation process in technology-intensive niche sectors. The study adopts an exploratory method based on a case study of an Apulian company operating in the field of aerospace, which provides services to vertical markets. The study employs the action research methodology, using structured interviews and direct observation for data collection, and an inductive and iterative approach for data analysis. Findings demonstrate that an effective strategy utilising LinkedIn can be a game-changer for high-tech SMEs. This strategy sees the implementation of a data-driven approach that relies on the analysis of data and knowledge from buyer personas to predict their expectations, which are crucial for identifying the ideal target audience. The proposed roadmap composed by several maturity steps to lead the company in the process of potential customer identification, lead generation till customer engagement, provides a useful guideline for company managers involved into a structured and standardised innovative digital marketing strategy. Indeed, by integrating the various digital tools and strategic communication on LinkedIn, SMEs have the opportunity to create a data-driven marketing strategy that can lead them to internationalisation and finally to company growth.

**Keywords:** Digital marketing, Data, Case study, SMEs, LinkedIn, Internationalisation

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## 1. Introduction

The evolution of marketing brings to a new definition proposed by Kannan and Li (2017), who describe digital marketing as "an adaptive, technology-enabled process by which organisations collaborate with customers and partners to jointly create, communicate, deliver, and sustain value for all stakeholders." There are significant challenges for organisations and marketers in developing digital strategies in today's age of information overload and social media communication. Firms use social media tools and platforms to build deep relationships with customers, increase traffic to their website, identify new business opportunities, create communities, distribute content, gain feedback from customers (Shree et al, 2021). The formation of networks is facilitated by social media sites and happens faster than in the past due to the development of digital technologies.

Adopting digital marketing tools can support SMEs to achieve a long-term competitive advantage (Bocconcelli et al, 2018) and reach new opportunities internationally (Fraccastoro et al, 2021). New digital technologies and social media platforms allow firms to analyse different types of data they can use to extract new ideas and better understand their markets and customers. Furthermore, the literature reveals a growing awareness about the positive relationship between digital marketing practices and SMEs' performance (Brooksbank et al, 1999; Cox et al, 1994; Gilmore 2011; Verhees and Meulenber, 2004). Dwivedi et al (2020) state that organisations must strategically use social media marketing to attract their target audience. Crucial is the choice of platform according to target users and marketing strategy. The application of social media as communication channels offers the opportunity to potentially improve the business performance of SMEs in several ways (Barashi, 2012; Wamba and Carter, 2014). The ideal approach to take is customer-centric, as the strategy is built on the basis of the users to be reached, identifying their needs and consequently the appropriate communication to establish, to improve networking. In particular, the strategy sees the conveyance of content that has an impact on engagement, thus based on values of authenticity and

transparency, furthermore, communication based on shared values provides a cue for people to engage (Sundström et al, 2021).

Research about digital marketing's use or benefits in B2B SMES reveals a significant gap in knowledge about its application in this type of companies. In order to address this gap, the study uses a case study of an Apulian SME which operates in a niche market. This company works in a high-tech B2B sector; specifically, it offers innovative satellite monitoring services targeting vertical markets such as transportation, utilities, and engineering companies. Using an exploratory approach based on action research methodology, the study aims to understand how the adoption of a digital marketing strategy based on LinkedIn can support the internationalisation of a high-tech B2B SME. This research objective is driven by the desire to understand how this social network can support a company's internationalisation process. Findings provide a standardised framework as a roadmap, composed by several maturity steps, offering a useful guideline for business managers to support them in the implementation of a digital marketing strategy using social media to pursue the internationalisation of B2B SMEs.

The remaining part of the study is structured in section 2 with the literature background, which focuses on the analysis of the existing literature on digital marketing as a driver for SMEs' internationalisation, section 3 explains the research methodology. Section 4 discusses the findings with the proposal of the "LinkedIn-based strategy funnel" and section 5 discusses the "Digital maturity model: A framework for evaluating enabling tools". Finally, section 6 discusses the managerial implications and conclusions, which highlight the importance of LinkedIn as a tool to support internationalisation, and section 7 points out the limitations of the study and provides directions for future research.

## **2. Literature Background: Digital Marketing as a Driver for SMEs' Internationalisation**

Digital transformation represents not only an economic and technological paradigm shift but also, and more importantly, a social change, which impacts industries and businesses from an international perspective (Broekhuizen et al, 2021; Ferraris et al, 2019; Fitzgerald et al, 2014). It is a process that enables companies to make strategic and operational changes due to the opportunities and threats posed by digital technologies (Vial, 2019). SMEs need to understand the benefits of digital transformation (Garzoni et al, 2020). Social media has been identified as a tool to identify entrepreneurial opportunities (Secundo et al, 2020), increase brand awareness, improve customer relationships, and gain market shares (Ahmad et al, 2018).

"The process of digitisation and the adoption of new technologies in companies involve a series of changes, which require different managerial capabilities and the development of new human resource management practices" (Fernandez-Vidal et al, 2022). Furthermore, "digital technologies represent a disruptive way of doing business and require significant changes by organisations to compete in the new environment" (Dash et al, 2021). Vassileva (2017) recommends that organisations must learn to integrate contemporary marketing models to address the new needs of the IT environment. Furthermore, technology is relevant, but as pointed out by Kane et al (2015), "it is strategy, not technology, that drives digital transformation", highlighting the importance of structuring a well and suitable strategy. In this innovative context, B2B firms are in a growth phase using social media, internet-based platforms that enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Itani et al, 2017). Social media are defined as a technological component that allow the communications, transaction and relationship building functions of a firm which leverage the network of customers and prospects to promote value co-creation (Andzulis et al, 2012).

A key factor in today's accelerated market transformation lies in the rise and spread of social media platforms, which offer new opportunities for customer interaction and to engage them on deep and meaningful levels (Dessart, 2017). Enabling and sustaining customer engagement through social media marketing is a vital effort to guarantee sales (Agnihotri, 2020). A useful tool to monitor and evaluate the progress into the entire customer journey is the digital marketing funnel, a framework that aims to support firms in several ways, such as to get more targeted leads (by reaching a more qualified audience), nurture customers (by providing a most valuable experience), and increasing revenue by saving costs.

Internationalisation is considered one of the key drivers of a company's growth (Lages et al, 2013). Social network services and digital platforms support the internationalisation process of firms by breaking down geographical barriers, allowing SMEs to access internationally relevant information easily and at low cost (Bai et al, 2021; Lee et al, 2022). Networking is a key practice that facilitates the internationalisation process, especially when networking with foreign partners to mitigate the risk of failure (Jafari-Sadeghi et al, 2020). SMEs' simpler and less bureaucratic structure allows them to adapt more quickly to change (Wang et al, 2017).

To structure a business internationalisation strategy using social media platforms, LinkedIn seems to be a useful networking tool for B2B relationships and could help gain a competitive advantage by sharing content with a professional tone of voice (Hollebeek, 2019).

However, an important gap emerges from the literature about the benefits of digital marketing in B2B SMEs. In order to fill it, the study uses a case study of an Apulian SME operating in a tech-intensive niche market.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This paper adopts grounded theory and action research as exploratory and qualitative research methodology (Glaser, 1978, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Suddaby, 2006) aimed at building theories from observation, following a bottom-up approach.

The research question at the basis of this study is: *How can the adoption of a digital marketing strategy using LinkedIn support the internationalisation of a high-tech B2B SME?*

This research question is driven by the desire to thoroughly investigate how a social network can support a company's internationalisation process, especially in the business case of a SME that, on the one hand, operates in a technology-intensive niche sector and, on the other, interfaces with a potential customer from outside its market. Furthermore, the study aims to create a framework that can be adapted by all SMEs operating in the B2B sector, as standard guidelines to be followed when starting the internationalisation process.

The study analyses a case study (Yin, 1994) of Planetek Italia, an Apulian technology-intensive B2B SME operating in the field of aerospace, which provides services to vertical markets such as utilities, transports, engineering firms, and other industries. This case study is relevant because it allows us to understand how LinkedIn supports the internationalisation process of a B2B SME operating in a technology-intensive niche sector and to build the optimal digital marketing strategy in an iterative and inductive way. Specifically, the study was conducted by observing and analysing Rheticus, one of the company's business lines within the SME with internationalisation as its objective, thus representing a pilot project that, if considered effective, can be extended to the company in its totality.

The process of data collection was carried out using two main techniques:

- Participant observation, through the methodology of action research (Susman and Evered, 1978), conducted by one of the authors during a six-month period of collaboration. "Such participation was moderate in nature; in fact, the researcher maintained a balance between the role of 'insider' and 'outsider', allowing for a good combination of involvement and the detachment necessary to remain objective" (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002; Schwartz and Schwartz, 1955);
- Structured interviews, using the guidelines offered by Boyce and Neale (2006), with five company stakeholders (business development manager, business development assistant, corporate & marketing communication specialist, co-founder & CMO, and global B2B development business). These interviews turn out to be necessary to understand the performance of the strategy as LinkedIn does not offer analytics related to messages.

Regarding the data analysis process, this study follows the grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), "process of iteratively and inductively constructing theory from observations using a process of theoretical sampling in which emergent insights direct selection and inclusion of the next informant or slice of data" (Gephart, 2004), aimed at building theories from observation, following a bottom-up approach. The interviewees' answers were subjected to a content analysis process to identify frequent themes and patterns, thus examining the rationale behind the choice of LinkedIn as a tool to support internationalisation.

### **4. Findings**

The company under analysis aimed to internationalise its services. Operating in a B2B context, the marketing strategy needed a well-defined structure since their "buyer persona" represents a decision-making actor of particular identified target industries. The "buyer persona" identified is the target audience the company wants to reach and represents a suitable contact that is crafted using market research and actual data owned by the company, considering the users' demographic details, business role, and objectives. First, the company proceeded to conduct an analysis of potential countries to interact with, and more importantly, which companies and which people within them they could identify as targets. The company's business development manager then proceeded to connect with these people on LinkedIn and a corresponding introductory

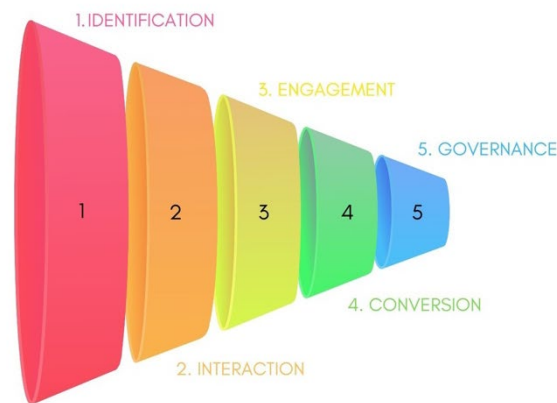
message. From the very first approaches, it was noticed that the performance achieved through the use of the social network was beneficial therefore it was decided to enhance its use and start with strategies geared towards direct interaction, implementing two different types of communication based on two identified goals:

- Lead generation, supported by standardised communication,
- Conversion, being a goal regarding sales, supported by a personalised communication strategy.

Findings highlight that the internationalisation strategy based on the use of LinkedIn saw its most concrete start with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the need to digitally integrate a strategy as it was not possible to conduct physical events. As a platform seen as the place of professionals, LinkedIn was deemed the most suitable social network with respect to the highly innovative industry in which the company operates.

As for the results achieved, the personalised strategy is still in its early stages, but it is the most suitable approach when targeting a precise user or a smaller audience. On the other hand, the standardised strategy was conducted through lead generation campaigns and prospect nurturing activities. Some countries responding positively and resulting in one-to-one meetings. Therefore, the company plans to continue with this strategy for future events, as the first interaction with the users on LinkedIn enabled a 1-to-1 meeting that would have been impossible to plan otherwise. Regarding expected results, a higher conversion rate is anticipated in personalised communication because of the highly targeted audience and the added value offered (e.g., providing reports, data analysis), thus requiring different marketing efforts.

Furthermore, it was possible to translate the findings into a framework which highlights the ideal path to follow in order to reach the target audience and lead them to conversion (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1: LinkedIn-Based Strategy Funnel**

The design of the above framework (Fig.1) was developed to concretely help and support managers in the application of an innovative digital marketing strategy through the use of LinkedIn.

The framework starts with identification of the buyer personas and the relevant countries the company wants to reach. The second step sees the interaction with users in target with the company's objectives, thanks to the 'filtering' operation offered by the platform. Then there is the engagement phase, pursued with lead generation or prospect nurturing activities by offering a value proposition to buyer personas (e.g. reports). The fourth step is represented by conversion, which is completed by the company's alignment of the buyer personas' business needs. The last but crucial step is governance, aimed at maintaining an active value relationship with customers so that they can up-sell or act as ambassadors for other potential customers.

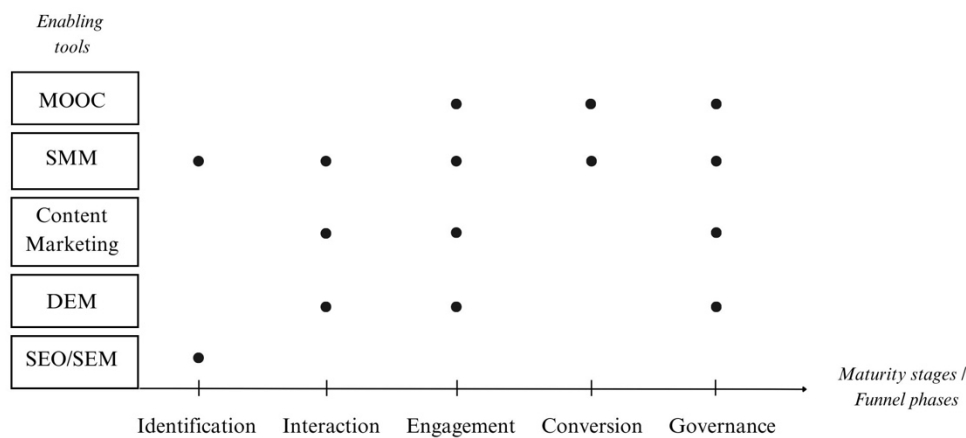
## 5. Discussion

LinkedIn surely represents a platform that enables a more personal interaction, as opposed to mailing, between salespeople and buyer personas. The latter are more easily reached, targeted, and profiled since it uses professional demographic data and therefore it is possible to reach the right people based on qualification, company, sector, seniority. Further, the "filter" function offered by the platform itself, which also enables them to break down geographic barriers and costs, accelerate lead generation, and perform a more accurate analysis of countries and markets and their resources.

The success of the LinkedIn-based strategy depends on various factors such as the way of communicating, the initial network of connections, and geographic area, but the company has seen positive results and plans to continue with this strategy.

However, there are limitations to consider, such as the fact that some geographic areas and certain types of users are almost unreachable on LinkedIn, as a result the tool is not universally effective but needs to be calibrated to certain circumstances. For now, each country must have its own method, as there is a risk of "losing" a market that is not active on LinkedIn. However, this is compensated by physical events, so there is a need for proper integration. In countries where LinkedIn is not widely used, a softer digital strategy with less effort is employed.

Overall, the "LinkedIn-based strategy funnel" (Fig.1) was designed with the aim of reinforcing and contributing to the existing literature on how a social network such as LinkedIn can support and facilitate the path of corporate internationalisation, suggesting concrete guidelines that can be a useful tool for implementing innovative digital marketing strategies.



**Figure 2: Digital Maturity Model: A Framework for Evaluating Enabling Tools**

It was also structured the "Digital maturity model: A framework for evaluating enabling tools" (Fig. 2), so that it is clear what role social media plays within the business environment. In fact, as can be seen from the framework, social networks, and in this case study, especially LinkedIn, can support the company throughout the growth and maturity stages or, in reference to Fig. 1, throughout the funnel. In fact, the company under analysis, although it has used, uses or is inclined to use search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM) tools, direct email marketing (DEM), content marketing, social media marketing (SMM), and massive open online courses (MOOCs), the only tool that appears to support all stages of the funnel (identification, interaction, engagement, conversion, governance) is SMM, and particularly in this case the creation and management of LinkedIn-based digital strategies. This is very important so that one can understand the potential that such a tool, if implemented with the right strategy, can improve digital marketing performance and help the company in the process of growth and internationalisation.

## 6. Managerial Implications and Conclusion

In order to address the research gap in knowledge about digital marketing's use or benefits in B2B SMEs, this study, driven by the key goal of analysing how the adoption of a digital marketing strategy using LinkedIn can support the internationalisation of a high-tech B2B SME, provides two useful frameworks as guideline for business managers that can support them in implementing an internationalisation digital marketing strategy (Fig.1; Fig. 2). Indeed, when a company decides to internationalise, digital transformation can be considered both a method and a tactic to pursue international business prospects and facilitate rapid communication (Feliciano-Cestero et al, 2023). Furthermore, thanks to digital platforms, companies could use social media channels to attract foreign customers and partnerships. When companies decide to develop digital technologies and explore innovations, they gain opportunities in the areas of knowledge benefits (Bouncken et al, 2021; Eerme and Nummela, 2019), international entrepreneurship (Pergelova et al, 2019), corporate

sustainability and competitiveness creation (Bouncken et al, 2021; Suhendra, 2017), among others. The internationalisation strategy using LinkedIn represents an interesting data-driven marketing approach, as it is based on the analysis of buyer personas' data, especially in terms of geolocation, socio-demographic characteristics, sector and company. This data-driven strategy is fundamental in identifying the target audience to intercept and communicate with, in order to optimise resources and not to disperse them towards users not in line with the characteristics of the buyer persona. LinkedIn turns out to be very useful in finding and identifying such users, in line with the target audience identified by the company. Moreover, it represents a tool in which networking is enhanced, so communication is more effective (Dwivedi et al, 2020; Sundström et al, 2021).

Thus, the main advantage derived from such a digital and innovative marketing strategy is the possibility of reaching new business opportunities in international contexts at reduced cost, thanks to social network platforms that allow physical and geographic barriers to be broken down (Dessart, 2017; Lee et al, 2022). Indeed, social media are identified as important tools to support entrepreneurial marketing in the creation of stable relationships with users by companies and also as important sources to improve business growth (Secundo et al, 2020). To effectively use LinkedIn, companies must conduct careful analysis to adapt their use to specific buyer personas. Due to the heterogeneous nature of the platform's user base, standardisation of processes may not always be possible. However, LinkedIn can support the creation of a streamlined workflow that helps companies achieve their internationalisation goals over time.

Overall, LinkedIn is a valuable tool to support internationalisation, but it must necessarily be integrated with other corporate actions, such as content creation and physical participation in events. However, it also requires experimentation to optimise its effectiveness and a willingness to invest in advertising and network building. In addition, a solid communication strategy is essential for establishing credibility and reliability, and proficiency in the languages of target markets is also important. The main challenge for companies is to be able to seize this opportunity by investing in resources that can bring knowledge into the company and are professionally capable of managing such tools to the best of their ability.

*The main managerial implications* that emerged from our study are first and foremost the identification of LinkedIn as a tool to support the internationalisation process, due to its ability to identify the right buyer person and reach them by breaking down geographical barriers and with low costs. Secondly, LinkedIn emerges as a tool as part of a broad ecosystem into which other activities need to be integrated. However, such a strategy needs careful analysis and experimentation as not all countries and markets might respond equally. Third, our study contributes to the existing literature by providing a strategic funnel based on LinkedIn as an innovative tool that can guide managers on the path to corporate internationalisation (Fig.1), and a digital maturity model for the assessment of enabling tools (Fig. 2).

## **7. Limitation and Future Research**

The main limitations of the study can be identified into the methodological approach embraced, consisting into a single case study, as well as into the sectorial characteristics of the research context. If those limitation restrict the opportunity of generalizing the results obtained, they allow to identify areas for future investigation. Specifically, future research could consider expanding the number of cases involved in by including a larger number of companies also considering a larger sectorial coverage. By allowing to collect a larger basis of evidences about the internationalization strategies of companies based on the adoption of LinkedIn, those evidences could offer a broader perspective and a better understanding of the dynamics within and across the sectors by allowing to identify specific and common patterns. This provides more robust evidences and insights into the effectiveness and applicability of the strategies proposed.

Additionally, future researchers could utilise the frameworks developed in this study as a guide for conducting in-depth analyses of the strategic funnel path using LinkedIn. This would involve verifying the effectiveness of the strategic funnel path in different contexts and industries, thus further validating and refining the proposed frameworks. Furthermore, the integration of different approaches for data collection based on quantitative methods and social media big data analytics could be used for assuring a major understanding of the observed phenomenon.

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