The Effect of the Internet Use on Customer Relations and Targeting Activities: An Empirical Study of UK Companies

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effects of the Internet use on customer relations and targeting activities. Based on the previous literature, the effect of the Internet on marketing activities has been categorised into four basic dimensions, 1) marketing and customer relations activities, 2) marketing targeting activities, 3) marketing performance, and 4) marketing efficiency. However, few empirical studies have been done regarding customer relations and targeting activities that are affected by the use of the Internet, and the effect of that on marketing efficiency. By studying the practice of 123 UK companies, it has been found that the use of the Internet positively influences customer relations and targeting activities, marketing performance and marketing efficiency.

Keywords: Customer Relations, Internet, Internet Use, Marketing, Performance, Targeting Activities, United Kingdom Companies

INTRODUCTION

The use of the Internet for business transactions is wide spread. For example, computer-manufacturing companies such as IBM, Xerox, Motorola, Intel, Sun, Hewlet Packard and Digital Equipment are beginning to use the Internet to link remote sites, business partners and customers for collaborative development, software support and distribution, and communications (Paul, 1996). In the retail industry, America’s largest TV-shopping firm, Home shopping network, has bought the Internet Shopping Network to consolidate its position and market share. In the pharmaceutical industry, Du Pont Marck Pharmaceuticals Co., in Rahway, New Jersey, uses the a public medical database to explore new areas of research in the treatment of central nervous system disorders. Du Pont has shortened the development cycle by facilitating collaborative research among experts and by scanning hundreds of reports to bring new drugs more quickly to the market (Soh et al., 1997, p. 217). In the aerospace industry, Boeing designs 777 in cyberspace.
The Internet enables Boeing to share design tools and process with engineers, customers, maintenance people, project managers and component suppliers across the globe. Using The Internet, Boeing’s customers no longer need to wait 3 years to place an order. It aims to deliver a plane in 8-12 months and to build 620 aeroplanes annually, up from 228 in 1992.

However, there are many reasons behind that. First, the current trends in the market environment, such as shrinkage of markets, increase of competition, technology turbulence, and diffusion of the IT through the organisations. These trends call for increased outsourcing activities, transformations in the value chains of the organisation and their distribution channels, and the formation of new network inter-organisational structures. In fact, these trends are calling for enhanced communication capabilities and increased inter-organisational exchanges.

Second, the Internet offers an array of opportunities for marketers. Evans and King (1999) defined some of these benefits as; multiple marketing usage, access to commercial research, competitive intelligence, customer service, just in time inventory planning, sales channels, support for channel partners, image enhancement, rabid growth, global reach, around the clock presence, ability to normally target marketing efforts, cost effectiveness, up to minute information, and multimedia vehicle.

Furthermore, among the several ways in which the Internet transforms the marketing functions are disintermediation, customer relations management, mass customisation, sales force automation, and collaboration and coordination (Eid & Trueman, 2004; Even et al., 2010; Kalakota & Whinston, 1997; Papows, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 1999; Rose et al., 2011; Venkatraman & Henderson, 1998). Disintermediation; the web enables marketers to uncover new ways to eliminate process redundancies and establish direct interface with customers, suppliers, and strategic alliance partners, thus reducing transaction cost significantly (Papows, 1998). Customer relations management, the speed interactivity, continuity, and customisation capabilities of the Internet enable marketers to manage customers as a strategic asset. Customer service and support functions can be significantly strengthened. Web sites and e-mail systems are being used to answer customers’ queries about products, availability, upgrades, and repairs as well as to show customers new products and gather their ideas. Mass customisation; the internet and e-mail system provide marketers extraordinary capabilities to target specific groups or individuals precisely and enable them to practice mass customisation and one to one marketing strategies by adapting communications and other elements of the marketing mix to customer segments of size one (Peppers & Rogers, 1999). Sales force automation; the Internet and the Web can play an important role in enhancing the productivity and effectiveness of the sales force by facilitating the selective automation of processes related to supporting the field sales force and integrating sales activity into a company’s information structure, (Kalakota & Whinston, 1997). Collaboration and Coordination; the Internet provides a universal connectivity in synchronous and asynchronous modes that facilitates intra- and interorganisational coordination on an unprecedented scale (Even et al., 2010; Venkatraman & Henderson, 1998). On the other hand, Soh et al. (1997, p. 217) found that businesses use the Internet for marketing and advertising; customer services and support; information gathering, and, to lesser degree, electronic transactions.

A great deal of the buyer-seller relationship between firms is being replaced or significantly transformed by the Internet. These systems include ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) on the back end and CRM (Customer Relationship Management) on the front end of a company’s supply chain (Borders et al., 2001; Even et al., 2010; Turban et al., 2002). However, using the Internet, companies can deliver three forms of service to customers (Skinner, 1999, p. 128): -

1. The same level of service through the Internet that that they can currently get directly from a sales person but with more convenient way. For example, visitors to
the company’s web site can hunt for a part by its number, by a description, or by its manufacturer. They can place an order for parts, pay for them electronically, track the status of previous orders, and even speed delivery time by connecting directly from the company’s web site to the shipping company’s site.

2. Personalise interactions with their customers and build consumer loyalty.

3. Companies can provide valuable new service inexpensively. A Company could, for example, draw on data from its entire customer base to make available wide-ranging knowledge of some topic. For instance, if a customer has a problem with a product, he/she might consult a site’s directory of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) to see how others have solved it.

The combination of these three levels of service could make the Internet channel very compelling for customers and because these services are basically just electronic exchange, they can be delivered at very low cost. Moreover, the technology allows companies to offer increasing higher level of service without incurring incremental costs for each transaction. For example, Cisco systems products reduced its annual operating expenses by nearly $270 million. But Cisco’s managers say the real value of the electronic channel is that it allows the company to provide buyers with a range of advantages—convenience, information, personalisation, and interactivity—that competitors cannot (Skinner, 1999, p. 128).

However, despite the greater growth of the Internet use in most developed nations and developing countries as well, systematic research in this field is still scarce. Most of the recent literature have done in an exploratory manner, yet only a handful have made an attempt to study the effect of the Internet on customer targeting activities (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Clarke & Flaherty, 2003; Karayanni & Baltas, 2003; Rose et al., 2011). Therefore, this paper is an attempt to determine the effect of Internet usage on marketing activities. Factors examined include the following: 1) marketing activities, 2) activities and 3) marketing efficiency.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The present paper pursues the following objectives:

- To identify the customer targeting activities that are affected by the Internet use and,
- To specify and test hypothesised relationships derived from the literature review.

In the following sections, first the development of the literature review and the hypotheses of the study are presented. Next, the methodology of the study is discussed followed by the analysis and results. More specifically, the hypothesised relationships is tested using SPSS and data collected by mail survey of 123 companies. Finally, the conclusions and their implications are discussed.

Literature Review, Conceptual Model, and Hypothesized Relationships

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effects of the Internet use on marketing activities and performance. Consequently, based on the previous literature, the effect of the Internet on marketing activities has been categorised into four basic dimensions, 1) customer relations activities, 2) customer targeting activities, 3) marketing performance, and 4) marketing efficiency. The four dimensions are discussed below:

Customer Relations Activities

Sales management includes customer classification and market segmentation, selling, service, and relation of existing customers. These activities seem to be very crucial for industrial marketers (Webster, 1984). This research focuses on sales activities that may be improved by using the Internet. For example, market segmentation, customer classification,
management of customer database, and electronic transmission of advertisement material (i.e., electronic catalogues) to the customer (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Furnell & Karweni, 1999; Lancioni et al., 2000; Rose et al., 2011).

Customer Targeting Activities

The Internet is becoming an essential tool in marketing. Its use has revolutionised the dynamics of international commerce and, like the telephone and fax machine, may be a major democratic force since it allows companies of different sizes to compete. Advantages have been cited by researcher such as low set-up cost, globalness, ease of entry, time independence, interactivity (Bennett & Roger, 1997).

Others see better information management, better integration of suppliers and vendors, better channel partnership, lower transaction cost, better market understanding, expanded geographical coverage (Damanpour, 2001). Opportunities exist for improved communication, corporate logistics, competitive advantages, collaboration, information reach and retrieval, marketing and sale promotion, data transmission, globalisation (Ellsworth & Ellsworth, 1995, 1996). Furthermore, this technology is linked to more rapid internationalisation, reduced importance of scale economies, reduced importance of global advertising cost as a barrier to entry, price standardisation, reduced importance of traditional intermediaries, electronic support for interfirm networks, new world wide marketing research medium (Even et al., 2010; Quelch & Klein, 1996).

There is also the possibility of simplifying the operational issues of doing business in other countries, reducing the dependence on agents and distributors, providing access to low cost or no cost market research, monitoring the online efforts of competitors’ product offerings and pricing, improving the feedback that comes directly from global market, enabling firms to reach a larger audience at a relatively low cost.

Marketing Performance

Marketing performance is evaluated not only in the basis of sales, but also on other criteria that are essential to marketing. Bondra and Davis (1996) stated that the measures of IT (i.e., The Internet) performance should be closely linked to the objectives that were to be achieved through the applications by the sales and marketing management. In empirical research sales, cooperation, return on assets and investments, service to customers, profits, market share, customer satisfaction, and outcomes given comparison levels have all been used either separately or in ad hoc combinations in the assessment of marketing performance (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Rose et al., 2011). However, the Internet is an out-directed IT that can be used both as a direct sales channel and as an interactive communication tool (i.e., sales force and marketing tool). Thus, it may affect sales performance in two ways:

- Through achieving direct sales (i.e., via the WWW); and
- Indirectly, through enhancing interorganisational relationships, providing higher levels of productivity.

However, the Internet creates the potential to interact with customers on a global scale. This interaction may, in turn, allow marketers to target their customers on a one-to-one base basis and to build brand loyal relationships (Arnott & Bridgewater, 2002, p. 87). Thus, this research focuses on performance issues that relates to marketing productivity such as sales, new orders, better service quality, superior customer relationships, new service development and adaptability to customer needs (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Mang & Stauss, 1999; Poon & SWATMAN, 1998).

Marketing Efficiency

The Internet has been characterised as a tool for facilitating sales force efforts, thus leading
to higher level of marketing efficiency (Anderson, 1996). Marketing efficiency resulted from cost reduction resulted through the use of the Internet in carrying out marketing activities, for example, reduction in cost of sales, customer service costs, time of routine service jobs, sales people travel time, and number of marketing people employed (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Borders et al., 2001; Chan & Swatman, 2000; Furnell & Karweni, 1999; Honeycutt et al., 1998; Lancioni et al., 2000; Lord, 2001; Lynn et al., 2002; Osterle et al., 2001; Rose et al., 2011). Osterle stated that the main benefits to be gained from implementing the Internet solution are as follow (Osterle et al., 2001, p. 127).

- **Efficiency of information processes for the customer.** The convergence of information in the Internet (see enables customers to obtain all relevant information on existing and new products (price, technical descriptions, sales conditions, and interchangeability) via one channel. Since the site is maintained centrally, the company can easily assure that the information is up to date and benefit from cost savings in producing and distributing catalogues, price lists, and technical documents.

- **Improved customer service level.** Additionally, previously unavailable, features have been introduced with the Internet and will yield significantly higher service levels. Such as technical documents download and electronic order tracking.

- **Order processing efficiency.** With the Internet, order-processing efficiency has increased remarkably. This has been mainly due to the homogenisation of master data, which reduces matching efforts and, consequently, eliminates misunderstandings as well.

The third group of variables focuses on customer targeting activities that might be affected by Internet use, and the consequent performance outcomes. As mentioned in chapter three, based on the previous literature we can categorise the effect of the Internet on marketing into four basic dimensions, customer relationships, customer targeting activities, marketing performance, and marketing efficiency.

**RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

**The Relationship Between the Internet Use and Customer Relations Activities**

Marketing strategy includes two basic elements, product management activities and sales management activities. Product activities that might be influenced by the use of the Internet include faster discovery of consumer needs, greater customisation of the products to customer needs, and faster new product testing (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Borders et al., 2001; Ellsworth & Ellsworth, 1995, 1996; Honeycutt et al., 1998; Lancioni, 2000; Lord, 2001; Poon & Swatman, 1998). Sales activities that might be improved by using the Internet are market segmentation, customer classification, management of customer database, and electronic transmission of advertisement material (i.e., electronic catalogues) to the customer (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Furnell & Karweni, 1999; Lancioni et al., 2000). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H.1:** Internet use for marketing purposes has a significant positive impact on customer relations activities.

**The Relationship Between the Internet Use and Customer Targeting Activities**

A number of authors have paid attention to the consequences of the Internet on marketing activities (Chaffey et al., 2000; Chan & Swatman, 2000; Duggan & Deveney, 2000; Hamill, 1997; Hamill & Gregory, 1997; Herbig & Hale, 1997; Hofacker, 2001; Kotab & Helsen, 2000; Quelch & Klien, 1996). These consequences include; good awareness, help in market selection, orientation to foreign customers, fast
communication and documentation procedures, finding the right overseas agent and effective marketing mix policy. Therefore the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H.2**: Internet use for marketing purposes has a significant positive impact on customer targeting activities.

### The Relationship Between the Internet Use and Marketing Performance

As discussed in chapter three, marketing performance is evaluated not only in the basis of sales, but also on other criteria that are essential to marketing such as improvement of customer relationships. Therefore, this study focuses on performance issues that relates to marketing productivity such as sales, new orders, and customer services and relationships (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Poon & Swatman, 1998). To see the role of the Internet in marketing performance the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H.3**: Internet use for marketing purposes has a significant positive impact marketing performance.

### The Relationship Between the Internet Use and Marketing Efficiency

The Internet has been characterised as a tool for facilitating marketing efforts, thus leading to higher level of marketing efficiency (Anderson, 1996). Many efficiency issues have been cited in the literature as a result of using the Internet for marketing purposes. These include for example, reduction in cost of sales, customer service costs, time of routine service jobs, sales people travel time, and number of marketing people employed (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Borders et al., 2001; Chan & Swatman, 2000; Even et al., 2010; Furnell & Karweni, 1999; Honeycutt et al., 1998; Lancioni et al., 2000; Lord, 2001; Lynn et al., 2002; Osterle et al., 2001). To see the role of the Internet in marketing efficiency the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H.4**: Internet use for marketing purposes has a significant positive impact on marketing efficiency.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### Data Collection

The generalisability of the study relied on the representativeness of the respondents. Therefore, a representative selection of companies was made from a database of companies that use the Internet for their marketing activities. The selection included companies from different industries. All the selected companies had implemented the Internet marketing system at least 5 year ago. A research packet, which contained a covering letter and an anonymous [self-administering] questionnaire, was mailed to the head of marketing departments; customer services officers or customer relationship managers [250 in total]. This procedure resulted in 128 (including 5 unusable questionnaires, usable questionnaire = 123). The response rate was calculated using the method proposed by De Vaus (1991, p. 99) and was 58.98%.

The sample can be described as follows: a majority of the respondents were involved on Internet marketing implementation [78.00%], most were younger than 40 years old [52%], and a few respondent [approximately 2.4%] were more than 50 years old. With respect to years of working with the Internet, approximately 25% of the sample had used Internet marketing for less than 5 years, and 61% had used it between 5 and 10 years. In terms of industry type (6.5%) of the respondents were from the aerospace industry, 11.4 were members of the agriculture industry, (6.5) were Chemical and Allied Products companies, (32.5%) were from the computer companies, (33.5) were industrial supplies companies and (9.8%) were textile companies. Finally, more than half of the respondents hold the position of marketing manager in...
their companies (55.3.8%). On the other hand, 26% hold the position of sales manager, 9.8% hold the position of export manager and 9.8% are IT manager.

To ensure that the valid responses were representatives of the larger population, a non-response bias test was used to compare the early and late respondents. χ² tests show no significant difference between the two groups of respondents at the 5% significance level, implying that a non-response bias is not a concern.

**Research Instrument Development—Measures**

The development of the research instrument was based mainly on new scales, because we could not identify any past studies directly addressing all of the issues in this research. However, and where possible, we used validated measures that have been previously applied. The constructs, scale items and factor loadings obtained from exploratory factor analysis are presented on the data analysis section.

Two consecutive rounds of pre-testing were conducted in order to insure that respondents could understand the measurement scales used in the study: First, the questionnaire was reviewed by three academic researchers experienced in questionnaire design and next, the questionnaire was piloted with two Internet marketing experts known to the researcher. The pilot took the form of an interview where the participants were first handed a copy of the questionnaire and asked to complete it and then discuss any comments or questions they had. The outcome of the pre-testing process was a slight modification and alteration of the existing scales, in light of the scales context under investigation.

**Analysis and Results**

First, the psychometric properties of the constructs were assessed by calculating the Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient and the items-to-total correlation (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). These coefficients are represented for each of the constructs in (Table 1). All scales have reliability coefficients ranging from 0.8809 to 0.9306, which exceed the cut-off level of 0.60 set for basic research (Nunally, 1978).

Second, we performed an exploratory factor analysis [with Varimax rotation] to examine if the items for a construct share a single underlying factor [i.e., are unidimensional]. Items, which did not satisfy the following two criteria, were deleted: [1] dominant loadings greater than 0.5, and [2] cross-loadings less than 0.35 (Hair et al., 1998).

The 21 items measuring the effect of the Internet use on customer targeting activities were subjected to principal component factor analysis. Eigenvalues and scree plot were used to determine the number of factors to be extracted. A four-factor structure was suggested using the criteria of an eigenvalue greater than 1, and the extracted factors account for 73.59% of the total variance. All factor loadings are generally high, and the lowest loading is equal to 0.567, while the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test of the factor analysis is substantial [0.878]. The resulting factor loadings are shown in Table 2 with all factor loadings less than 0.5 suppressed. All items loaded onto the expected factors as

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**Table 1. Measure of constructs’ reliability**

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<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Number of Items</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
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<tr>
<td>Customer Relations Activities</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.8809</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customer Targeting Activities</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.9306</td>
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<td>Marketing Performance</td>
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<td>.9228</td>
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<td>Marketing Efficiency</td>
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they were originally designed. Factor loading were all higher than 0.5 on its own factors and, therefore, each item loaded higher on its associated construct than on any other construct. This supported the discriminant validity of the measurement.

### Hypotheses Testing

To investigate these hypotheses, all variables were entering in a single block. We found that the proposed model explains a significant percentage of variance to indicate the relative advantage in using the Internet for B-to-B international marketing. Table 3 shows that 78.9% of the observed variability in the relative advantage is explained by the four independent variables ($R^2= 0.795$, Adjusted $R^2= 0.789$).

To test the equivalent null hypothesis that there is no linear relationship in the population between the dependent variable and the independent variables, the ANOVA in Table 4 is used.

Results from Table 4 shows that the ratio of the two mean squares ($F$) was $114.716$ ($F$-value=$114.716$, $P<0.001$). Since the observed
significance level was less than 0.001, the four variables influence marketers’ attitudes toward using the Internet for their B-to-B marketing activities.

To test the null hypothesis that the population partial regression coefficient for a variable is 0, t-statistic and its observed significance level were used. The results are shown in Table 5.

**DISCUSSION**

Generally, our findings support our hypotheses. The results of the questionnaire helped us to understand the effect of using the Internet for marketing purposes. The use of the Internet significantly affects customer relations activities, customer targeting activities, marketing performance and marketing efficiency.

In our study, it has been found that the Internet use has a significant positive impact on customer relations activities. This result is consistent with the theoretical views, which state that the Internet is a facilitator of market-orientated strategies (Deighton, 1996). Furthermore, this finding shows that the Internet facilitates customer relations activities, which, in turn, improve marketing activities (such as respect for/ and orientation to foreign customers, effective marketing mix policies and good international awareness, knowledge and orientation), performance (in terms of new sales, total sales, customer service and customer relationships) and marketing efficiency (in

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<th>Table 3. Model summary</th>
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Source: Analysis of survey data

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<th>Table 4. Summary of ANOVA</th>
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Source: Analysis of survey data.

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<th>Table 5. Results of regression coefficients</th>
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<td>Model</td>
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<td>Customer Relations Activities</td>
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<td>Marketing Efficiency</td>
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Source: Analysis of survey data
terms of decrease in the number of sales force, reduction of salespeople travel time, reduction of sales and customer service costs and time reduction of routine service jobs).

Regarding customer targeting activities, it was found that these activities are significantly affected by the use of the Internet. These findings support the previous researches that stat that the Internet provides numerous advantages for companies wishing to expand their overall potential in targeting final customers. Such as an increase in customer awareness, simplified documentation, access to low cost export market research, improved knowledge of markets, and communication cost savings (Bennett, 1997; Damanpour, 2001; Hamill, 1997a; Kotab & Helsen, 2000; Palumbo & Herbig, 1998; Quelch & Klein, 1996; Watson et al., 2000; Wilson & Abel, 2002; Zugelder et al., 2000). Additionally, customer targeting activities were found to affect the marketing efficiency. It appears that the Internet facilitates customer-oriented activities, which, in turn, lead to improved performance. The results of our study further support previous findings that the Internet has attained many objectives for example, speeding up communication between customers and their suppliers, improving service levels, and reducing logistics costs. (Furnell & Karweni, 1999; Honeycutt et al., 1998; Lancioni et al., 2000; Lord, 2001)

**CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study focused on the effects of Internet use on marketing activities. It began by looking at the marketing domain for factors that might be affected by using the Internet for marketing activities. Firstly, to examine the customer relations and targeting implications of the Internet, the study focuses on customer-oriented activities which may be facilitated through the use of the Internet. More specifically, within the spectrum of marketing activities, it examines the issues of finding the “right” agent or distributor, management of company/distributor relationship, customer awareness, market selection, orientation to customers, communication and documentation procedures and marketing mix policies. Secondly, the study focuses on those customer relations and targeting activities that may be integrated and enhanced with the interactive attributes of the Internet. Therefore, it examines the issues of discovery of customer needs, customisation of products, new product testing, market segmentation and customer classification, sending electronic catalogue to customers and managing the customer database. Finally, marketing efficiency resulted from cost reduction resulted through the use of the Internet in carrying out marketing activities has been evaluated in this study. This study specify marketing efficiency as reduction in cost of sales, customer service costs, time of routine service jobs, sales people travel time, and number of marketing people employed. The study develops a model of the international marketing implications of the Internet. It has validated the model conceptually and empirically.

This study provides insight for Internet marketing, its implementation and the linkages between Internet use and marketing efficiency for marketing education and training. The marketing concept and marketing orientation should be stressed since the IS/MIS practitioners and other departmental managers may not have an academic background that supports these new marketing practices. It is necessary, therefore, to have a market-oriented IT/MIS manager in order to make an impact on the success of a company. On the other hand, marketing people should have the required experience and skills to teach other departmental managers how to exploit the market knowledge gained through the use of the new information and communication tool. Otherwise, they will prevent their companies from taking full advantage of the enhanced communication capabilities of the Internet.

Finally, the findings stress the great role of marketing department and sales force in the successful implementation of the Internet marketing strategies and have some important implications for the marketing people. In the
light of the increasing information intensity, the new generation of marketing people should be highly qualified, trained and updated to be able to take full advantage of the Internet capabilities. This also calls for reshaping the recruitment, deployment, motivation, training, evaluation, and compensation standards and policies of the marketing management.

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Yasser El-Kassrawy obtained his PhD form Lancaster University, UK. He is a lecturer of behaviour science at Tanta University. He is also teaching in MBA programs at Arab academy for Science and Technology (AAST), Cairo, Egypt. His research interest is in investigating social, cultural and organisational implications surrounding the use of computer-based information systems in contemporary organizations. He is a permanent business consultant for Auto Group Company, Cairo.