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Open or Delete: Decision-makers' Attitudes Towards E-mail Marketing Messages

Martin Andersson

Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping, Sweden
P O Box 1026, JÖNKÖPING. 551-11
martinandersson86@gmail.com

Martin Fredriksson

Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping, Sweden
P O Box 1026, JÖNKÖPING, 551-11
Martin.Fredriksson@axxos.com

Adele Berndt

(Corresponding Author)

Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping, Sweden
P O Box 1026, JÖNKÖPING. 551-11
adele.berndt@jibs.hj.se

ABSTRACT

Organisations make use of e-mail marketing messages, with Swedish companies spending SEK40 million on this form of marketing communication. The purpose of this paper was to examine the attitudes of decision-makers in the Swedish manufacturing industry regarding e-mail marketing messages received. The authors used a quantitative research approach with an online-survey in order to collect the necessary data. The population was decision-makers within the manufacturing industry in Sweden and 1777 responses from decision-makers were received and analysed. The majority of decision-makers tend to have negative attitudes toward e-mail marketing messages. Differences in attitudes exist between those of different ages and positions within companies. While respondents indicated that they check their e-mail frequently, no significant differences in attitudes to e-mail marketing messages could be identified. Marketers can attempt to improve attitudes among recipients by building relationships with the recipients prior to sending e-mail marketing messages, and paying attention to the layout and content of the e-mails.

Keywords: e-mail marketing; attitudes; B2B; e-mails; decision-makers; Sweden

INTRODUCTION

It can be said that people today live in a network civilization where technology has made increasingly more information available through the Internet (Rust & Espinoza, 2006). The most common daily activity among Swedish Internet users according to a recently conducted report (Findahl, 2011) is the sending of e-mails. By using the Internet and e-mails as a marketing channel, geographical location is no longer an issue for marketers, since people and companies all over the world can be easily reached at a lower cost than offline marketing techniques (Gordon & De Lima-Turner, 1997). In the US, research indicated that 60% of American companies increased their e-mail marketing budget for 2012 (marketingcharts.com, 2012b; Strongmail, 2011) and this is expected to continue in the future (Anon, 2013). Spending this amount of money makes it important that the message is read by the receiver, and that action is forthcoming based on the message received.

Research has been conducted on the subject of attitudes towards marketing as early as the 1930s (Xiaoli, 2006). Several studies have been conducted about people's attitudes towards advertising on the Internet (Wang & Sun, 2010a; Wang & Sun, 2010b; Cho & Cheon, 2004; Mehta & Sivadas, 1995), unsolicited e-mails (SPAM) (Gordon & De Lima-Turner, 1997) as well as e-mail marketing in a B2C context (Cases, Forniers, Dubois & Tanner, 2010; Chowdhury, Parwin, Weitenberner & Becker, 2006; Korgaonkar, Lund & Wolin, 2002; Gordon & De Lima-Turner, 1997), but in the case of attitudes towards e-mail marketing in a B2B context, there is a gap in the research. Much of the research with respect to e-mails has focused on the senders and their perspective (Renaud, Ramsay & Hair, 2006) creating the opportunity here to investigate the recipients' attitudes.

Research that has been undertaken in this context has focused on the B2C marketing, but little research has been done in the B2B context as decision-makers in organisations have not been the focus of the research. Consequently, the study seeks to investigate the attitudes of decision-makers in the Swedish manufacturing sector towards this form of marketing communication.

This paper will start out by examining the theory that explains attitudes and the nature of e-mail marketing and then discuss the methods used in the study. The findings as well as the implications and conclusions will be presented.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Radicati Group (2013) estimated that 182.9 billion e-mails were sent and received in 2013, of which 100.5 billion were business e-mails. According to the IRM report (2011), companies in Sweden spent approximately SEK 40 million in 2012 on e-mail marketing, so there is still a vast amount of money spent on e-mail marketing each year by these companies. According to Forrester (2011), attitudes toward e-mail marketing have improved over the last few years with the number of e-mails being deleted without being read down from 73% to 59%. Organisations send marketing messages to clients and prospective clients to advertise products and services, but the question remains: how are these e-mails received? A vast amount of money is spent by organisations on sending these e-mails, but what are the attitudes of the recipients to these e-mails? What do the recipients of e-mails think and feel when they receive advertising e-mails?

The purpose of this paper is to analyse attitudes of decision-makers in the Swedish manufacturing industry regarding B2B e-mail marketing and the e-mail marketing messages they receive. The analysis will investigate the components of attitudes, as well as determining whether any specific demographic factors influence the attitudes towards e-mail marketing.

LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The Nature Of E-Mail Marketing

E-mail marketing can be regarded as the promoting of products or e-mails through the use of e-mail (Marketing Terms, 2012). It is used to get consumers' attention to one's product, service or need and ultimately to get them to act in a specific way. E-mail marketing has a number of advantages that other marketing methods do not offer. The main advantage of using e-mail marketing is that it is very cost effective and exceptionally easy to customise and target (Hosford, 2011; Malhotra & Birks, 2007) and so the advertiser is able to reach a large population (Merisavo & Raulas, 2004). E-mail marketing can be used for different purposes including sharing information, strengthening the brand, directing potential customers to a website while also promoting products and services (Merisavo & Raulas, 2004). The recipient

of the e-mail marketing message would then be encouraged to make contact with the organisation in a number of different ways to contact.

Attitudes

Attitudes in general are regarded as important as they affect future behaviour that is exhibited (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, & Hogg, 2010). For this reason, organisations seek to develop positive attitudes towards their products, services and communication.

This study is based on the Tri-component model (or ABC) theory of attitudes developed by Bagozzi, Tybout, Craig, and Sternthal (1979) which examines the three components of attitudes, namely affect, behaviour and cognition. This approach makes it possible to determine an overall attitude as well as measure the individual components. *Affect* describes how a receiver feels about attitude objects comprising the emotional component of an attitude which can be either positive or negative, depending on the individual's cognitions (opinions) about the item. *The behaviour aspect* component is concerned with the person's tendency to react to the object and the reactions will be different, depending on how receivers are influenced by what they know about the object. *The cognitive component* refers to the beliefs and thoughts that a receiver has toward the object. While they may not be based on an objective assessment or be true, they still play a vital role in how the person perceives reality and furthermore, the attitude of an object. The cognitive component is likely to be more conscious than the other elements of attitudes, and is more vulnerable than others to logic-based persuasive techniques (Solomon *et al.*, 2010). In the case of e-mail marketing messages, the affective or emotional component articulates how people feel (either positive or negative) towards the e-mail marketing messages, the behavioural component is how people act or perform towards the e-mail marketing messages, and the cognitive component is the belief about the e-mail marketing message.

Attitudes Towards E-Mails

E-mails are regarded as an integral part of life, having transformed both work and personal activities (Renaud *et al.*, 2006). It is a nearly instant form of communication, with many recipients answering their e-mails almost immediately (Renaud *et al.*, 2006). For organisations sending e-mails to their customers, e-mails are a cost-effective way of communicating with a large number of people simultaneously. This convenience for the sender has an impact on the receiver, including stress to answer a large number of e-mails (Demiridjian, 2005).

Attitudes to e-mails have improved over the past four years (Forrester, 2011). These positive attitudes are seen in a reduction in the number of e-mails being deleted without being read, more e-mails being forwarded and buying intentions having remained constant.

Attitudes Towards E-Mail Marketing

E-mail marketing messages can be personalised (as in the case of direct mail) yet are able to be received immediately. According to Smith and Swinyard (1983), attitudes serve as a dependent variable when it comes to studies of promotional effects. Xiaoli (2006) mentions that an attitude towards a specific advertisement can lead to a specific attitude towards the brand, as well as affect a customer's purchase intention. The attitude will be influenced by the perception of the perceived value of the advertising (Ducoffe & Curlo, 2000). In 2006, 73% of the consumers said that they deleted most of the e-mail marketing messages without reading them; in 2011 this number was down to 59% (Forrester, 2011).

How recipients react when an e-mail is delivered

The initial reaction is founded on past experience with the media and similar messages. When

an e-mail marketing message arrives at the receiver, a rapid oblivious decision is made whether or not it is of potential interest. The decision is primarily based on previous experience with e-mail marketing with the sender, and with the perceived relevance of the e-mail subject line (Renaud *et al.*, 2006). It is suggested by Micheaux (2011) that there are three possible actions that can be taken:

- *Route A* means that the receiver will choose to ignore or delete the marketing e-mail message if it is classified as valueless. In this route, the recipients will, without effort, immediately make a decision and there is no elaborative process leading to that decision.
- *Route B* means that the receiver finds the marketing e-mail relevant and interesting, the recipient will open the e-mail to inspect the content. This also leads to a further engagement with the marketing messages by behavioural reactions.
- *Route C* is a destructive route which is regarded as the opposite to route B. It builds up perceived pressure and has a destructive consequence for the sender of the e-mail marketing message. After the receiver has decided that the e-mail marketing message has relevance and is worth opening, the receiver makes excessive efforts by evaluating the content, finding it to be irrelevant and thereby producing a negative attitude. This negative attitude may vary depending on the intensity of the effort and can furthermore result in massive avoidance behaviours, for example unsubscribing or even complaining to the Internet service provider (ISP) which can cause problems for the sender of the e-mail marketing message. The negative attitude towards the e-mail marketing message can be generalised from the message to the organisation itself.

The sender of e-mail marketing messages clearly aims for route B, but Micheaux (2011) states that it is much better for the recipient to choose route A instead of route C if he or she believes that the message is of no potential interest. By choosing route A, the receiver is more likely to remain available to future e-mail marketing messages from the sender.

The Pressure Of E-Mail Messages

An important factor relating to e-mail is the perceived pressure associated with receiving them. This pressure comes from the amount of e-mails received in a specific time period, affecting the recipient's perceived ability to cope (Micheaux, 2011). Micheaux (2011) also studied the advertisement sent by a single company in order to understand the perceived pressure by the receiver. The result of the study was that the perceived pressure relates more to the receiver's past experience of e-mail marketing, personality, state of mind and the attitudes towards the brand or company, than to the actual volume of messages received from a company. It is crucial for companies to deal with the perceived pressure to avoid attitudinal and behavioural effects that in the long run will hurt the brand or company.

Hypotheses

In the case of e-mail marketing messages, they are directly sent to the mailbox of the recipient, and thus the attitude to the e-mail marketing message is important. The importance of a positive attitude towards a product or advertisement is the goal of many a marketer, based on the view that a positive attitude will influence the behaviour exhibited in the future. Hypothesis 1 thus reads:

Decision-makers in Swedish organisations have positive attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages

It is suggested that there may be differences between different groups regarding their attitudes towards technology and e-mail marketing messages as it is believed that older people are not as comfortable with technology (Czaja & Sharit, 1998). Thus, Hypothesis 2 reads:

Demographic factors influence the attitudes of Swedish decision-makers towards e-mail marketing messages.

Various researchers have investigated the number of times people check their e-mails every day. Researchers describe e-mails as an "addiction" (Demiridjian, 2005) or the tyranny of e-mail (Eichhorn, 2003). While figures vary, it has been suggested that 40% of people check their e-mails between 6 and 20 times per day (Cummings, 2012). The checking of e-mails has also been affected by the proliferation of smartphones which have unrestricted connectivity. If people check their e-mails more often, it could be inferred that they are positive to the receipt of e-mails, and e-mail marketing messages. Thus, Hypothesis 3 reads:

Decision-makers who check their e-mails more often are more likely to have positive attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Use was made of a quantitative research method. The *population* was decision-makers within Swedish manufacturing organisations who were chosen as the target group, based on the fact that they have the power to make financial decisions and do business, and are thereby targeted by e-mail marketing messages. Sweden had the majority of the population on the Internet by 2001 (Geens, 2012), making it a suitable country to target for this research. The authors had an available registry of e-mail addresses to the target group, which did serve as the foundation for the research. To be a part of the population in this study, a total of seven criteria needed to be met. The company had to have at least 10 employees, have a turnover which exceeds 10 million SEK, be a manufacturer and be established in Sweden. Furthermore, the respondent must have a valid e-mail address, have influence on purchasing decisions, and work within a manufacturing company.

A list of 7 896 companies fulfilling these requirements with a total of 14 020 e-mail addresses was obtained. These companies were geographically distributed over Sweden. There are a total of 52 256 manufacturing companies in Sweden (Ekonomifakta, 2011), thus the population of this study reaches 15% of the total manufacturing sector. The survey was sent to all of the available e-mail addresses in the population, thus use was made of a census.

The *research instrument* comprised three sections. Section A collected demographic data from the respondents, Section B determined the general attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages while Section C investigated actual behaviours associated with the receipt of e-mail marketing messages. Sections B and C made use of a four point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 4= strongly agree).

The *data collection* was conducted with the help of a web-based survey, which was sent out in an e-mail message to the respondents. A web-based survey has the advantages of making it possible to reach a large number of respondents regardless of their geographical location. Another factor that mattered in the choice of data collection method was that e-mail is one of the most inexpensive methods as well as one of the least time consuming ways of conducting a survey of this magnitude (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). The survey was *pilot tested* before the survey was sent to the respondents of the empirical study. The result of the pilot testing resulted in changes in wording as well as some layout changes. Various analyses were

conducted of the data using SPSS 19. These included t-tests and ANOVAs.

FINDINGS

The survey was sent to 14 020 e-mail addresses, and out of them 1 331 'bounced back', thus a total of 12 689 e-mails were sent. From this, 1 777 usable questionnaires were obtained, a response rate of approximately 14.0%, which is on par with response rates on e-mail surveys in general (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). The profile of the respondents is reflected in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondent profile

Characteristic	Distribution
Age	2.2% 20-29; 18% 30-39; 39.6% 40-49; 28.8% 50-59 and 11.5% older than 60
Gender	92.3% male; 7.7% female
Education	6.1% had primary school or less; 40.1% had completed high school; 15% completed occupational college; 34% had a university qualification and 4.8% described their education as "other"
Branch of Industry	46.1% were in the engineering industry; 7.8% were in the vehicle industry; 7.3% were in the processing industry; 5.9% were in the food processing industry; 6.2% in wood processing; 5.1% in the plastic industry; the balance spread over furniture, textile, drug and other industries
Number of employees in the organisation	15.8% had less than 20 employees; 21.6% 20-29 employees; 35.8% 50-249 employees; 9.3% 250-499 employees; 17.5% 500 or more employees (These terms are as defined by EU 2003/361)
Position in the organisation	32.1% owner, partner or CEO; 27.2% senior manager; 18.7% middle manager; 17.4% project leader or similar; 4.6% other

Respondents were also asked how often they check their e-mails as an indication of their actual behaviour. The majority of the respondents tend to check their e-mails 'more often than once every hour' (30.9 %). Of the 1 777 respondents, 11 % check the e-mail account 'more often than every 10 minutes', but only 1.5 % check their e-mails 'once a day or less' during working hours. The responses appear in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency with which respondents checked their e-mails

Frequency	N	%
More than every 10 minutes	195	11.0
Between 10 and 30 minutes	469	26.4
Between 30 and 60 minutes	549	30.9
Between 60 and 180 minutes	400	22.5
Once a day	137	7.7
Less often than once per day	27	1.5
Total	1777	100

Reliability was determined for all the statements as well as for the dimensions of the study. Initial reliability testing indicated that the statement 'I receive too many e-mails' should be removed, which resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 for all the items in the questionnaire and this statement was not used in further analysis. The Cronbach's alpha determined for each dimension exceeds 0.6, which is regarded as satisfactory reliability (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). These are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and reliability on the dimensions of the study

	Cronbach's alpha
Total attitude	0.910
Affect	0.795
Behaviour	0.802
Cognition	0.780

Hypothesis Testing

H1: Decision-makers in Swedish organisation have positive attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages.

Mean scores were calculated to determine the attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages as well as on the individual determinants. The mean attitude score is negative, as are the scores on each of the dimensions associated with attitudes (the ABC components).

Table 4: Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha
Total attitude	1.916	0.472	0.910
Affect	1.960	0.521	0.795
Behaviour	1.781	0.537	0.802
Cognition	2.001	0.549	0.780

(1= strongly disagree; 4= strongly agree)

To analyse the responses further, the total attitude responses were binned according to the total score per respondent to determine the percentages that could be regarded as either negative or positive. This resulted in respondents with low scores (negatives), neutral respondents and positive respondents. The majority of respondents (**59.4%**) had negative attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages. It is further interesting to note that 39% of respondents could be categorised as neutral while only 1.6% could be classified as positive. The detail is provided in Table 5.

Table 5: Total ABC

Group	Points	Frequency	%	Mean	Total Mean	SD
Negative	<32	1056	59.4	25.76	30.69	7.55
Neutral	33-47	692	39.0	37.4		
Positive	>48	29	1.6	50.28		

* Maximum of 64 (16 statements * 4 points)

From the mean scores on the statements associated with each of the attitude dimensions, it can be seen that decision-makers do not have positive attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages, and the standard deviation associated with these dimensions indicate that there is a high level of agreement among respondents in this regard. Hypothesis 1 thus cannot be accepted.

H2: Demographic factors influence the attitudes of Swedish decision-makers towards e-mail marketing messages

Use was made of a t-test and one-way ANOVAs to evaluate various demographic factors and attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages. These findings are summarised on Table 6.

Table 6: Summary of demographic data and attitudes

Characteristic	Summary
Age	There are significant differences in each of the dimensions, specifically between the 40-49 age group and other groups, specifically those in the 50-59 age group ($p=0.021$) and those older than 60 ($p=0.000$). The attitude score was the lowest for the 40-49 age group (29.67), with slightly more positive attitudes among both older groups of respondents, with those older than 60 having the most positive attitudes (32.38).
Gender	No significant differences were observed between the genders ($p=0.166$), potentially as the number of females was limited in the responses.
Education	Significant differences between those who had a university qualification and those who had only a school leaving certificate ($p=0.000$)
Branch of Industry	No significant differences based on the branch of industry ($p=0.730$)
Number of employees in the organisation	No significant differences based on the number of employees in the organisation ($p=0.941$)
Position in the organisation	Project managers differed significantly from CEOs and senior management ($p=0.000$) as well as from middle management ($p=0.004$). Project managers were more positive than the other groups (mean = 32.76).

H3: Decision-makers who check their e-mails more often are more likely to have positive attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages.

Use of an ANOVA indicated no significant differences between the respondents' frequency to checking their e-mails mails and their attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages. Hypothesis 3 is thus not accepted.

DISCUSSION

The results show that decision-makers within the manufacturing industry in Sweden in general have negative attitudes toward e-mail marketing messages. The following quotation reflects a respondent's sentiment on e-mail marketing messages:

'I don't even read them, they are immediately deleted. They are invasive and uninvited.' One respondent (2012)

It has previously been established that the attitudes affect future behaviours, and in the case of these messages, negative attitudes affect whether these e-mails are opened or deleted (perhaps without reading them). When this happens, it affects the likelihood of attaining the desired outcome of the company that sent the e-mail marketing messages. The result is that the decision-makers are not exposed to the marketing messages, which was the intention of the company sending the message.

The study found an overall negative attitude towards e-mail marketing messages received. Further, this study found the attitudes toward e-mail marketing differ depending on the decision-makers' age and position at the company. The attitudes were more negative in the 40-49 age group with older (and younger respondents) being slightly more positive, and attitudes were also more negative the higher position the decision-maker had at the company. The age factor could be a result of the fact that younger people are more used to computers than older people, while in the case of older recipients, it could be linked to the volume of messages

received and perceptions of e-mail pressure from the recipients. The younger decision-makers might perhaps have greater computer skills and are therefore less negative towards e-mail marketing. Decision-makers high in the organisation would also receive more e-mail marketing messages, and are thus exposed to more messages due to their perceived influential position in the organisation. It is also interesting that only 8% of the respondents were females. The reason for the skewed gender participation could be that the manufacturing industry in Sweden is overrepresented by males, or that there are, at the moment, more males than females working in decision-making positions within the manufacturing industry in Sweden.

The frequency with which respondents indicated they checked their e-mails is similar to the findings of Renaud *et al.* (2006), who found that 34.3% reported checking their e-mails every 15 minutes or less. The frequency of checking e-mails did not affect the attitudes towards the e-mail marketing messages received.

A summary of the findings with respect to each hypothesis is summarised in Table 7.

Table 7: Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Summary
<i>H1: Decision-makers in Swedish organisations have positive attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages.</i>	Swedish decision-makers do not have positive attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages. The hypothesis is not supported.
<i>H2: Demographic factors influence the attitudes of Swedish decision-makers towards e-mail marketing messages</i>	Age and position in the organisation were found to change the attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages, with top and middle management having more negative attitudes and the 40-49 year age group being more negative towards these messages. The hypothesis is partially supported
<i>H3: Decision-makers who check their e-mails more often are more likely to have positive attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages.</i>	The hypothesis is not supported.

The *managerial implications* associated with this study indicate a number of challenges for organisations using e-mail marketing. Attitudes are generally not positive to this form of communication, so it is necessary to develop ways to generate positive attitudes through building relationships with the recipients of e-mail. This research stresses the importance that more positive attitudes will consequently give a more positive actual behaviour, which in the end will result in higher opening frequency, as well as less deleted and unread e-mail marketing messages. It is thus important that the organisation investigate specific strategies that can be used to foster the development of positive attitudes towards their e-mail marketing messages. One such strategy could be to examine the structure of these messages, or the frequency and content of these messages.

One of the *limitations* of this study is the absence of theories in the field of e-mail marketing as e-mail marketing is still a comparatively unexplored area. There were also many respondents from the Engineering industry (46%), which affects the extent to which the findings of the study can be generalised to other sectors in the economy.

This study provides opportunities for *further research*. This is an exploratory field with very few previously conducted studies. Studies of implications of e-mail marketing from a marketing perspective would be both interesting and meaningful. With the result from this study in mind, it would also be valuable to investigate how marketers should act and perform

to change the decision-makers' attitudes as well as their actual behaviours towards e-mail marketing. Qualitative research with a hermeneutics focus could contribute to greater understanding of the nature of the problem. It would also be interesting to examine how attitudes and behaviours affect the efficiency and profitability of e-mail marketing.

As this study investigated the attitudes and behaviours in the manufacturing industry in Sweden, it would also be valuable to repeat the study on decision-makers within other countries to see if the result is generalizable in other areas. A possible outcome could be that Swedish decision-makers differ in behaviour and attitude from other countries.

A final further research recommendation is to repeat this survey in the future and over a longer period of time to be able to compare and identify possible changes of attitudes and behaviours. The benefit of a study of longitudinal nature is that it is exceptionally useful when studying development and lifespan issues.

CONCLUSION

There is an important link between attitudes and actions, which has been a theme of marketing. The aim of the study was to investigate the attitudes of decision-makers in Swedish manufacturing organisations towards e-mail marketing messages. The study was conducted from the perspective of the Tri-component Model of Attitudes, thus enabling the researchers to examine attitudes from a broad perspective. The findings show that there are negative attitudes towards e-mail marketing messages, and this is true for all the attitude dimensions. Significant differences between respondents were found based on age and position in the organisation. The regular checking of e-mail messages (in general) was not found to transfer to a positive attitude towards e-mail marketing messages. The findings show a great deal of work still lies ahead for organisations using this type of marketing communication to increase the success of this form of communication.

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