"Inbound social media marketing and increased sales in SMEs: a correlational study in the pet food industry"

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BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES

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INBOUND SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND INCREASED SALES IN SMES: A CORRELATIONAL STUDY IN THE PET FOOD INDUSTRY

Abstract

New market trends have prompted Peruvian companies to apply techniques aimed at attracting potential customers, that is, to use inbound marketing, especially in the pet market, which has a profitable and competitive niche, driven mainly by the "pet-friendly" trend. This research aims to determine whether inbound marketing actions have a positive correlation with online sales. The methodology is quantitative, correlation, cross-sectional, and non-experimental. The target audience is men and women, between 18 and 35 years old who have made online purchases in the Peruvian pet food SME, Rapi Pet S.R.L. The sample is non-probabilistic and is composed of 248 people who completed a structured questionnaire of 24 questions. The results show positive perceptions of both variables with values higher than 70% after applying the barometer test, the reliability of the questionnaire was also established under Cronbach's alpha of 0.922 and a correlation coefficient of 0.66 was obtained for the variables, as well as a p-value lower than 0.05 after performing the normality test. It is concluded that there is a positive relationship between inbound marketing actions and the increase of online sales in the company under study.

INTRODUCTION

New trends within the market have driven companies to plan and implement commercial strategies to increase their sales; therefore, during the increase of startups generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, many physical companies have ventured into the digital market, causing an increase in advertising in the digital media (Paraschiv et al., 2022). Within the Peruvian market, the pet market maintained sustained growth during the 2020 pandemic thanks to the "pet-friendly:" trend and the high number of households with pets in the country, as at least 60% of Peruvian households have pets, making this market a profitable niche (Falconí et al., 2021).

The main attraction of this market is that consumers are willing to invest in the health and happiness of their pets; therefore, pet stores offer a wide variety of products, ranging from specialized food to accessories and toys for animals, in addition to maintaining constant innovation and applying creative digital strategies, due to the intense competition in the sector (Meneses, 2019). However, the problem with entering this market revolves around the fact that traditional marketing is applied, which can sometimes be intrusive; so it is essential to work in parallel with innovative business strategies (Pons et al., 2022; Orellana-Treviños et al., 2023; Cabrera et al., 2023).

In this context, the inbound methodology has been fundamental for the pet market, since this strategy is differentiated by creating high-value digital content that can be implemented both organically and paid, in addition to its application being crucial to increasing the commercial activity in various businesses, as it is based on detailed segmentation and avoids being intrusive in sales to provide relevant content that attracts the consumer and motivates them to interact with the brand, thus achieving greater efficiency and an increase in the number of potential clients (Baldeón & Hilarión, 2021; Xiao et al., 2021; Lehnert et al., 2021; Castilla, 2019).

By establishing that it is necessary to implement a non-intrusive methodology through various means of content marketing to encourage the generation of potential customers, the question arises: what is the relationship between the inbound marketing strategy in social networks and the increase in sales of a Peruvian SME, dedicated to the marketing of pet food and accessories?

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to several experts in the field, inbound marketing is a digital marketing strategy that focuses on offering high-quality content to attract and interest potential customers or leads. The creator of this new movement is the creator of Brian Halligan's Hubspot organization in 2009. Its objective is to encourage interaction and conversion while reinforcing the brand's position in the market (Rodríguez & Andres, 2018; Laverie et al., 2020). This methodology is defined as a versatile strategy that can be implemented both organically and paid, being considered an effective methodology in communicating with consumers on social networks, as it uses persuasive non-intrusive techniques. Finalmente, se consigue que se conviertan en leads para la empresa, es decir, contactos con los que se puede mantener una relación a largo plazo (Baranchenko et al., 2019; Gloor et al., 2020). From here, marketing automation comes into play, as each lead receives specific information to get to know the company and generate the need to purchase the product or service (McCarthy et al., 2014; Alhouti & Johnson, 2021; Moncada, 2019; Sánchez et al., 2020; Vasquez et al., 2023).

Brand recall and brand attributes are also relevant in inbound marketing, the former is defined as the space that the brand has in the consumer's mind through the product, encouraging the desire to purchase it. On the other hand, brand attributes seek to be highlighted to the customer, as they are made up of all those characteristics or qualities that distinguish and represent the brand within the market (Rojo, 2020; Kilijanek & Ozga, 2022; Rafael & Trejo, 2023; Datta et al., 2017).

Sales is defined as the set of processes performed by a salesperson to effectively complete a commercial transaction, both personal and impersonal. To achieve this, it is necessary to implement sales strategies that allow creating a structured strategic plan, with clear objectives aimed at satisfying customer expectations, as well as anticipating their purchasing motivations. Besides, sales control is not only limited to volume, but also encompasses other indicators that include annual, mobile, and diagnostic standards, which serve to analyze and manage sales efficiently, so sales are closely related to marketing, and are essential to increase profits and stand out in a highly competitive market. On the other hand, sales teams are the most important actors in the process, as they are the ones who seek to get prospects, get in touch with them, establish a positive relationship, and finally offer them a solution that encourages them to buy the product or service. Usually, these efforts result in a sale, a satisfied customer, and revenue for the company (Castro & Vega, 2018; Barón et al., 2018; Zapata, 2019; Venegas et al., 2022; Mardiani & Ramadhan, 2023; Culqui et al., 2023).

The four key dimensions of sales or also called include: customer prospecting, which involves focused research on customers to get to know them better and facilitate the interaction process throughout the sales funnel, this is developed by analyzing the prospect's behavior in the face of the offer (Nova & Abraham, 2020; Taken & Murphy, 2019); prospect qualification, which is based on establishing opportunities for leads to be buyers of a company, based on their socioeconomic status, marital status, place of residence, job position, estimated income, age, body size and many

more, likewise on the interaction or interest they show during the negotiation, in summary on the results of previous research that was given in the long term of the behavior and characteristics of customers who have historically purchased at least once a product or service (Brambilla & Dalmarco, 2015; La Rosa & William, 2022); the presentation of the commercial message, which is the one where all the information collected from the leads is analyzed, to understand the needs, the commercial capacity and the intention and motivation to buy, here also the meeting is presented, where the representative offers all the additional information that the customer needs, it can be a demonstration, a trial period or a consultancy, this depending on the business model (Nugroho & Harjanto, 2022; Baker, 2022; Hernandez et al., 2023; Freeman & Dardis, 2022); and finally the closing of the sale, which is the key point of the sale, since through the same staff or through sales software there are automated solutions to complete a sale, even if it does not happen, the leads that have not become customers can resume their buying process at the point where they abandoned it (Anenberg et al., 2019; Rojas et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2021).

According to previous studies on the correlation between inbound marketing and increased sales, the inbound marketing methodology has proven to have a positive impact on the positioning of a brand in the digital environment (especially in e-commerce), due to its non-intrusive nature when approaching potential customers; this, in turn, leads to increased profitability in the medium and long term, as it implements valuable content that follows the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire and Action) model, which is a commercial strategy that leverages the needs of the audience to arouse the interest of customers and convince them to consume a product (Erdmann & Ponzoa, 2021).

Sinoka et al. (2019) pointed out in their research that the inbound strategy directly drives the purchase decision, which leads to a digital ecosystem that offers an increase in sales, being an ideal way to present an offer. Similar to the above, in the retail sector, after carrying out a detailed segmentation and applying the inbound strategy, it was possible to facilitate the creation of communities, which after periodically delivering valuable content, showed greater receptivity to the offers promoted by the brand. Likewise, the dissemination of the experience with the brand on social networks indirectly provided more prospects who were attracted (Khurram et al., 2018).

According to Umar and Abdulmutallib (2022), sales promotion as a promotional tool has a significant improvement in customer-based brand equity. Therefore, to have strength in terms of market leadership and market share, organizations should pay more attention to their marketing activities such as sales promotion, and this can be achieved by improving the quality and awareness of branded products and services. This has a similarity with Liadeli et al. (2022), as they conclude that creating a large community on social networks is not essential to drive sales, as proprietary social networks are more effective for brands with fewer followers. Besides, the implementation of the inbound marketing strategy demonstrates an efficient use around the advertising campaign, as this part of valuable organic content generates that the user relates to the content.

On the other hand, according to Ocaña and Freire (2021), in the B2C sector it was found that companies that provide a good customer experience, through optimal response times and empathetic management of commercial language, generate greater trust in the consumer and achieve maintain expectations; Also, promoting consumer interest with real, timely content aligned with customer preferences, following the current trend according to the management category where the inbound methodology would be applied, generates greater perception and interest in the product or service. The research allowed us to know how companies manage their social networks under current conditions, starting with COVID-19. It was found that there is timely but limited management of social networks, mainly Facebook, in the companies under study.

In the same sense, according to the research of Agnihotri et al. (2016), in a B2B context, using structural equation modeling, it was proven that the use of social networks by salespeople influences the communication of information, improving salesperson responsiveness and customer satisfaction. Besides, salesperson responsiveness has a positive relationship with customer satisfaction. The results suggest

that social networks play an important role in communicating information to customers, not as a direct factor, but as an antecedent.

Finally, Moncada (2019) shows in his research that Movistar uses an inbound marketing strategy focused on customer satisfaction, the provision of information they seek on the Internet, and orientation to the purchase of their products and services. Promoting the customers' perception of value and facilitating the positioning of the brand in the market. The results showed that, within the B2C sector, the inbound strategy has a favorable impact on the level of sales, with an increase of 17% in customers served and 13% in sales volume, thus causing a boom in the annual sales of the company studied.

During the last years, Rapi Pet S.R.L. has applied the inbound methodology, taking into account this, the general objective of the research is to determine if the inbound marketing actions have a positive correlation with online sales. On the other hand, to determine the relationship between social media presence and online sales, between informative content and online sales, between brand recall and online sales, between brand attributes and online sales.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research is of a correlational type and was carried out through a methodology that presents a quantitative research approach, under a non-experimental design at a cross-sectional level. Consequently, the population was presented under a finite model, for 800 frequent and sporadic customers, which were recorded in the database of a Peruvian pet food SME, Rapi Pet S.R.L., in 2021. To determine the sample of the present investigation, the simple random sampling formula of the finite population was used, where after applying the calculation, the total sample was 248 frequent and sporadic clients. The population was defined as customers of both generous between 18 and 35 years of age, which covers 50.25% who buy online, which are frequent and sporadic online shopping in the company and are residents of the city of Metropolitan Lima (La Cámara, 2023).

The technique that was implemented was the survey, in this sense, the instrument to collect the data is the questionnaire, which consists of 24 closed response items based on a Likert scale with 5 alternatives ranging from (1) as disagree and (5) for agree, where the questions are based on the dimensions of the inbound marketing variables. The questions are based on the dimensions of the variables inbound marketing and sales increases. Likewise, it was highlighted that the items and dimensions of both variables of this study were adapted from the research obtained from Moncada (2019) , which supported the validity of the same through expert criteria.

Besides, after the analysis of the items of each variable, Cronbach's alpha with an index of 0.922 was established for the whole instrument, as well as an evaluation by the judgment of 5 experts belonging to the field.

Consequently, through a questionnaire in Google Forms, the collection of information was carried out, to finally be able to interpret it through analytical software, which was the SPSS using descriptive and inferential statistics through the Baremos test, and to obtain the correlation, the Spearman coefficient was used to evidence and understand the results, to answer the question.

From an ethical point of view, it should be noted that when applying the survey to the participants, prior consent was requested, indicating that the information provided would only be used for academic purposes and that no personal data would be disclosed. On the other hand, the APA regulations were applied for the writing, according to the 7th edition still in force.

Next, demographic data of the respondents will be presented, denoting various analyses developed under Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS software, which are relevant to the research.

Table 1. Respondent profile

Gender	Age		Total
	15-25 years	**26-35 years**	
Female	75	31	106
Male	66	76	142
Total	141	107	248
Total %	56.9%	43.1%	100.0%

Table 1 shows the profile of the respondents, where their age ranges between 15 and 35 years. According to the data obtained, the predominant

gender between 26 and 35 years of age is male, accounting for 43.9% of the total, while the female gender predominates between 26-35 years of age with 56.9%.

Table 2. Respondent profile by gender and number of hours of navigation

| Hours of navigation | Gender of respondents | | Total |
	Male	Female	
1-2 hours	76	72	148
2-3 hours	39	19	58
3-4 hours	21	9	30
Total	142	106	248
Total %	57.3%	42.7%	100.0%

Table 2 shows both profiles of respondents according to the number of hours of navigation and gender, where both male and female profiles spend mostly 1 to 2 hours of navigation on the social network Facebook.

3. RESULTS

Cronbach's alpha with an index of 0.922 was achieved, which indicated the reliability of the instrument, after the implementation of the survey 303 responses were recorded from consumers of a pet food company., of which 55 (18.3%) were excluded because they did not meet the research criteria, since they did not surf the Facebook network (7%), did not have the age established for this study (2%), and the remaining (9%) were eliminated since they exceeded the requirements for the sample. This left us with only 248 valid responses for the present study. After establishing this, the authors proceeded to determine the reliability of the instrument.

Table 3. Instrument reliability index

Reliability test	
Cronbach's alpha	No. of items
.922	12

Table 3 shows that the reliability of the instrument is "excellent", with a Cronbach's alpha level of 0.922, after which the authors proceeded to present the analyses of the normality test, to continue with the various respective analyses among the variables and to contrast the proposed objectives according to the hypotheses proposed for this research.

Table 4. Criteria on inbound marketing and dimensions

Variable and its dimensions	Level	Ni	%
Inbound marketing	Low	6	2.4%
	Medium	64	25.8%
	High	178	71.8%
	Total	248	100.0%
Presence in social networks	Low	9	3.6%
	Medium	110	44.4%
	High	129	52.0%
	Total	248	100.0%
Information content	Low	29	11.7%
	Medium	111	44.8%
	High	108	43.5%
	Total	248	100.0%
Brand awareness	Low	25	10.1%
	Medium	123	49.6%
	High	100	40.3%
	Total	248	100.0%
Brand attribute	Low	21	8.5%
	Medium	113	45.6%
	High	114	46.0%
	Total	248	100.0%

In Table 4, after applying the Baremos test it is evident that, of the total of 248 respondents, 25.8% qualified at a medium level and 71.8% qualified with a high level with respect to the criteria that the respondents have about inbound marketing.

Table 5. Perception of sales increase

Variable and its dimensions	Level	Ni	%
Sales	Low	3	1.2%
	Medium	49	19.8%
	High	196	79.0%
	Total	248	100.0%
Prospecting customers	Low	19	7.7%
	Medio	112	45.2%
	High	117	47.2%
	Total	248	100.0%
Prospect classification	Low	11	4.4%
	Medium	119	48.0%
	High	118	47.6%
	Total	248	100.0%
Message presentation	Low	6	2.4%
	Medium	64	25.8%
	High	178	71.8%
	Total	248	100.0%
Sale closing	Low	15	6.0%
	Medium	102	41.1%
	High	131	52.8%
	Total	248	100.0%

Table 6. Test of normality

	Test of normality					
Variables	**Kolmogórov-Smirnov**			**Shapiro-Wilk**		
	Statistical	**Df**	**Sig.**	**Statistical**	**Df**	**Sig.**
Inbound marketing	0.136	248	0.000	0.917	248	0.000
Sales	0.156	248	0.000	0.882	248	0.000

Table 5 shows that, out of the total of 248 respondents, 19.8% rated medium and 79.0% rated high with respect to the respondents' perception of the Sales variable, as well as its dimensions.

In Table 6, proceeding to the test of normality of the items, according to the sample size, this is guided by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov analysis, where it is evidenced that p-value (0.00) is less than α (0.05) for the data set analyzed; therefore, it is of a nonparametric nature, and the correlation will be evaluated based on Spearman's statistical test.

In Table 7, the results obtained through Spearman's rho show a considerable positive relationship under the established values of 0. 66. Likewise, the significance level was less than 0.05 (p-value 0.000 < 0.05); therefore, the alternative hypothesis where there is a relationship between the inbound marketing variable and sales increase must be accepted, thus rejecting the null hypothesis due to the statistical evidence supported.

Accordingly, in Table 8, the results obtained through Spearman's rho, denote an average positive relationship under the established values of 0.37. With a significance level of less than (p-value 0.000 < 0.05), the alternative hypothesis should be accepted where there is a relationship between the dimension Presence in social networks and the increase in sales, thus rejecting the null hypothesis due to the statistical evidence presented.

Table 7. Relationship between inbound marketing and sales increase

		Correlatives		
			SUMV1	**SUMV2**
Spearman's rho	Inbound marketing	Correlation coefficient	1.000	.663**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
		N	248	248
	Sales	Correlation coefficient	.663**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
		N	248	248

Table 8. Relationship between presence on social networks and sales

		Correlatives		
			V1D1	**SUMV2**
Spearman's rho	Presence on social networks	Correlation coefficient	1.000	.375**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
		N	248	248
	Sales	Correlation coefficient	.375**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
		N	248	248

Table 9. Relationship between information content and sales

		Correlatives		
			V1D2	**SUMV2**
Spearman's rho	Content of the information	Correlation coefficient	1.000	.529**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
		N	248	248
	Sales	Correlation coefficient	.529**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
		N	248	248

Table 10. Relationship between brand recall and sales

			V1D3	SUMV2
		Correlatives		
Spearman's rho	Remembrance of brand	Correlation coefficient	1.000	.584**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
		N	248	248
	Sales	Correlation coefficient	.584**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
		N	248	248

The results obtained in Table 9 through Spearman's rho express a considerable positive relationship under the established values of 0.52. With a significance level of less than 0.05 (p-value 0.000 < 0.05), the alternative hypothesis should be accepted where there is a relationship between the Information content dimension and the increase in sales, thus rejecting the null hypothesis due to the statistical evidence presented.

Likewise, it is observed that the results obtained in Table 10 through Spearman's rho, denote a considerable positive relationship according to values of 0.58. This has a significance level of less than 0.05 (p-value 0.000 < 0.05), thus accepting the alternative hypothesis where there is a relationship between the brand recall dimension and the increase in sales and rejecting the null hypothesis due to the present statistic evidenced.

Finally, in Table 11, the present results obtained through Spearman's rho denote a considerable positive relationship according to values of 0.60, with a significance level of less than 0.05 (p-value 0.000 < 0.05), so the alternative hypothesis where there is a relationship between the brand attributes dimension and the increase in sales must be accepted, thus rejecting the null hypothesis due to the statistical information evidenced in the table.

4. DISCUSSION

In relation to the research objective, it was determined that there is a relationship between the inbound marketing strategy in social media and the increase in sales in Rapi Pet S.R.L; after applying the scale test where a trend is identified within the sample studied, represented by 71.8% of 248 respondents describe a positive perception towards the processes implemented in social media by the inbound marketing variable. Likewise, after applying the same test, it was evident that 79.0% of the 248 respondents had a positive perception of how sales are developing.

The authors proceeded with the correlation tests, which according to the size of the sample were oriented under the Kolmogorov analysis, where p-value 0.00 less than α (0.05) was evidenced, thus evaluating the correlation under the Spearman test. In this way, it was found that there is a considerable positive relationship of 0.66 between inbound marketing and sales, which indicates a favorable correlation between both variables. In this sense, the same test was applied to the dimensions studied by this study in relation to inbound marketing, determining that these have a positive correlation with the increase in sales.

In the findings of Terho et al. (2022) and Copeland et al. (2018), based on customer behavior in B2B sectors in various areas of the United States, there is an increase in the purchase decision due to the "customer

Table 11. Relationship between brand attributes and sales

			V1D4	SUMV2
		Correlatives		
Spearman's rho	Brand attributes	Correlation coefficient	1.000	.604**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
		N	248	248
	Sales	Correlation coefficient	.604**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
		N	248	248

journey" strategy, which is evaluated more efficiently with the inbound methodology and that the corresponding improvements can be applied to the strategy, this coincides with the results found in the research as it shows that the inbound strategy achieved a greater attraction to the product and/or service. In the same sense, according to Harikrishnan and Vinith (2022), there is evidence of a boom in sales through the inbound methodology, since it presents better communication of the brand with consumers of the millennial generation under the category of the B2C sector, through non-intrusive or sponsored content, thus facilitating sales, reason why the closures are perceived as more dynamic than the direct ones.

Subsequently, this study shows the relationship between informative content and sales, which agrees with the research carried out by Muñoz (2019) in a telecommunications company in Chepén-Peru, where he concluded that content publications must be carried out periodically and with relevant information for capture customer curiosity, generating a direct relationship with the level of sales. This is consistent with the findings of Sinoka et al. (2019) where, after studying several B2C companies in customer service areas in Pakistan, they determined that the correct management of information content on social networks and the implementation of the quality of information translates into greater persuasion, thus increasing the stimulation of the user's purchase intention.

This research also manages to determine the relationship between brand recall and increased sales, this finding was like that found by Khurram et al. (2018) who conducted a study based on recurrent buyers in the retail sector in Pakistan, showed how brand recall leads to greater positioning in the consumer's mind, which results in a preference for the brand that generates it, making a favorable change in the consumer's purchase decision, which favors sales.

Finally, it can be stated that there is a relationship between brand attributes and increased sales, coincid-

ing with Umar and Abdulmutallib (2022) who, after conducting a study based on sales promotions carried out by organizations in Kano in South Africa, argue that the value of brand attributes has a greater effect during promotional campaigns, since the user associates the quality of the brand with that of the promoted product. Likewise, after studying companies in the B2C sector in Amsterdam (the Netherlands), Liadeli et al. (2022) point out that paid advertising on social networks can have a negative effect, since the value of the brand's attributes can be overshadowed or in some cases it has been damaged by external events, consumer confidence in the brand may be affected.

As for methodological limitations, three could be identified. The first being the scarcity of information, so the study had to align itself with research in the retail sector that is like the company in this study. Also, the data collection process was affected because many of the customers to whom the survey was sent via WhatsApp had changed their number or simply did not read the messages, therefore, some had to be contacted individually on Facebook MSG. Finally, being able to contact the author of the instrument and request permission for its use and adaptation was a problem, however, after several searches on platforms such as Facebook and various websites, it was possible to obtain his consent.

It is proposed to continue investigating the impact of inbound marketing on increasing the company's sales and analyze how inbound marketing strategies and tactics influence the lead generation process to drive greater sales, this through a mixed methodological approach that include both collecting and analyzing quantitative data, tracking sales metrics and comparing results before and after the implementation of inbound marketing, as well as conducting interviews and surveys with marketing and sales managers to gain a deeper understanding depth of the factors and mechanisms involved in this process and to be able to have more professional information that can debate the issue involved.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to determine whether inbound marketing actions have a positive correlation with online sales. After a descriptive analysis, it was found that customers have a favorable opinion about

the application of inbound marketing and its dimensions in the sales of the Peruvian company of food and accessories for pets. It was also determined that, after its implementation, through the frequency of publication, segmentation, and good management of the brand image, there is a positive correlation between the increase in sales. This positive correlation indicated that a good presence generates greater engagement, encouraging the purchase intention. The relationship between informative content and increased sales was also noted, highlighting the importance of providing valuable content to arouse users' interest and promote buying. Besides, a positive relationship was evidenced around the memory of the brand and sales, where the pet food company achieves the memory through gifts to consumers and publications with pets. Finally, a significant favorable relationship between brand attributes and increased sales was confirmed, attributable to quality service, on-time home delivery, and free delivery services by the company.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Formal analysis: Boris John Vasquez-Reyes.
Investigation: Franklin Cordova-Buiza.
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