

**MIT**Sloan  
Management Review

# The Art of Selling with Social Tools

Chris Andrew and Gary Liu (Hearsay Social), interviewed by Gerald C. (Jerry) Kane

# The Art of Selling with Social Tools

Hearsay Social helps salespeople keep track of what's going on in the lives of their customers and prospects by monitoring what customers have posted in social media and suggesting relevant content to share. Chris Andrew, the company's managing director of Europe, and Gary Liu, vice president of marketing, explain how it works.

**CHRIS ANDREW AND GARY LIU (HEARSAY SOCIAL), INTERVIEWED BY GERALD C. (JERRY) KANE**

**I** imagine you had an interface on your computer that told you what things were going on in your customers' lives based on their posts on social networking forums such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. It might be useful to know if a customer was car shopping, or planning a wedding, or looking for a new job.

Hearsay Social helps business people create such a space. It helps salespeople build a professional social presence, alerts them to when customers post relevant buying signals and provides a content library of ready-to-post comments or articles to share "to make you look like the expert you are." Its customers include small businesses such as insurance agents and wealth advisors, as well as the larger firms that employ these salespeople and relationship managers.

Chris Andrew, the founders' first company hire in 2010, is now the managing director for the company's operations in Europe. In 2013, he moved to London from the San Francisco headquarters to lead Hearsay Social's international expansion. Gary Liu, vice president of marketing, guides all aspects of the company's marketing, including the company's social media, website and demand generation functions. He previously was at Siebel Systems and ServiceSource and says that "the common thread around these three companies, including Hearsay Social, is that they're enterprise-focused: they're software firms that are really focused on helping business sales leaders, marketing leaders and, in our case, compliance leaders, be successful growing their business."

Andrew and Liu spoke with Gerald C. (Jerry) Kane, an associate professor of information systems at the Carroll School of Management at Boston College and guest editor for *MIT Sloan Management Review's* Social Business Big Idea Initiative, about how Hearsay Social customers are using the platform, what's different in Europe, and how compliance issues factor into social business management.

## **Give us an example of how your platform works.**

**Gary Liu:** Sure. In our customer base we have a lot of large financial services and insurance firms. So imagine a wealth manager or a financial advisor that's using Hearsay Social.

They're essentially a relationship manager or a salesperson. They've got a set of clients, and they want to be able to continue to manage and nurture and best understand what's happening in their current customer base. They also want to continue to build out new clients.

Traditionally, they have done that by hosting info seminars or asking for referrals from good customers. Best practices have long dictated that reps need to connect with existing customers in the physical world, in the real world, in order to develop long-term relationships.

But our lives (and where customers spend a great deal of their time) have increasingly migrated online in recent years, so why wouldn't reps want to connect with customers on the social media front as well? Follow them if they are on Twitter, connect with them on LinkedIn or even friend them on Facebook, if they have that sort of relationship. It's one more opportunity to foster the relationship, and social media can be used very effectively to enhance real-world interactions.

Same thing with non-customers, with a referral, or with someone you hosted at an event. The latest best practices are that you say hello, remember their names, remember details about them, and then connect with them in an authentic way online, saying something like, "Hey, let's keep in touch."

What Hearsay Social does is monitor across your connections on social media and identify the most relevant posts that people are sharing across your network. People are sharing information on social media at an incredible rate — everything from cat videos to what they had for breakfast. They're also sharing an incredible amount of detail around what's happening in their personal lives that include life events, which are very relevant to a financial advisor.

**Hearsay Social flags personal things people have posted on social media, like getting married or having a baby?**

**Liu:** Getting married, having a baby, yes, or getting a new job or moving. What the application does is, through machine learning algorithms and our technology platform, we're able to distill those key life events and show them in a dashboard so that only the relevant signals, if you will — and buying triggers are presented to a financial advisor.

So if I'm a financial advisor, and if a client just got married, I'll know that because I'll see an alert or social signal that there are a lot of congratulations in his social media network, and perhaps because he updated his profile. I can reach out on social, congratulate him, but then now in the real world, I'll know to reach out to set up some time with him as well to say, "Hey, this is a key milestone, and if I can ever be of service, let me know."

In addition, on our platform, you can share content in social media from our content library. There is value-added and thought leadership content, say, about the top five things you need to do when you get married related to insurance, life insurance, etc. Our customers can take that material and share it with their contacts, and really be that resource in a very critical time in his life. It's all designed to help build authentic relationships and engage with the right customers at the right time.

**That's a great description. Chris, do you want to build on that at all?**

**Andrew:** Gary touched on the social business element of how you might use identification of key events at scale to engage more effectively. Another angle that pertains to how these global institutions are using our platform would be content distribution.

The standard way that brands get their message out to consumers, prospects and clients is kind of a one-to-many approach, where you have the corporate-approved message, it's broadcast in a very big way and may be localized a bit for specific markets, but it's done through print or CD or radio. One of the things that can be done through our platform is localized content distribution in two models.

The first would be corporate-to-local, which is what we started — taking corporate-approved content and suggesting it to certain groups of individuals that represent your business. So, maybe you're targeting content based on a region or targeting based on a specialty of what you sell or who you sell to. We allow those local individuals, be they in support or sales or marketing, to fine-tune the message for their immediate audiences. This helps get a more relevant conversation going at a local level through the person who represents the brand, rather than just the brand itself.

The other area we've been able to support is what we'd call local-to-corporate flow of content. Through our platform, when you've got thousands or even tens of thousands of employees on our solution distributing content, they're doing a lot of very unique things at local levels that may work on a global scale and inform the corporate marketing teams.

### **Can you give an example of how something happening at a company on a local level moved out to a wider audience?**

**Andrew:** Yeah, there's an interesting story from a global insurance company where they had an insurance agent who published a piece of content in his hometown in Ohio. He took a picture of a sign that was made at a Little League baseball field basically saying, "Hey, parents, chill out. It's a Little League game. You know, we're all here to cheer on the kids. You can stop yelling at them."

That post went viral within his local community as a nice message from a local insurance agent, a leader in the community. There was a spike on the reports, so much so that the corporate marketing team said, "Oh, this agent in Ohio seemed to have a message that really caught on." So they took his post and suggested it to a number of his peers across the country.

And what happened is that post also worked in a number of other local markets where Little League was happening, and all of a sudden there was a very positive brand association between this insurance company and Little League community baseball. It

ended up going so viral that Major League Baseball heard about it and reached out to the insurance company and said, "We'd like to sponsor the purchase of tens of thousands of these signs to be distributed through these insurance agents at a local level — and furthermore, we want to buy these signs from a customer of that local insurance agent who makes signs for a living."

So that was a flow of content, enabled via social, which went from local to corporate. The platform helped corporate figure out how to listen locally for events that are relevant that either can have a more global impact or can help lead to a specific one-to-one sale.

I'll touch on just one more, and that's the way we enable corporate organizations to have some visibility into trends on local levels. Maybe there's a certain amount of change in the job sector happening in a region. Or maybe there's a concentration of people purchasing new homes in a certain area based on the social data we're gathering at the local level. What we've seen some of the more sophisticated organizations do is take this data to their internal analytics and statistics teams and ask how the data should affect the company's regional advertising, content marketing and sales strategy, both locally and globally.

And we'll see this affect their marketing campaigns on a global level, where they adjust their message based on the significant events that are happening so that targeted content is made more relevant to specific regions. It kind of goes back to what Gary was saying — the right content for the right person at the right time, tying marketing more closely to sales. And that's been a key for us over the last four years.

### **I assume your platform can be tailored to whatever situation the particular agent finds himself in, correct?**

**Andrew:** Yeah, that's exactly right. So whether it's multiple languages or multiple workflows or different things that need to be archived, it's completely configurable from a settings perspective for each business to use the product wherever they need to.

**Liu:** Just to be clear, when you're dealing with these very large companies and you're talking to them about how to enable their field sales, this is an enterprise-class solution, so it's not something you can download from the app store and deploy and do all these things. There's a need for risk management and regulation compliance, and an element in terms of workflow for approvals if it's going to be secure and adhere to regulatory standards depending on the line of business.

Each company has its own risk profile, so it can turn on and turn off certain things. Companies also need to be sure all social media communications from employees follow their general communications policies, of which social media is obviously now a very important channel.

**Hearsay Social recently moved into the U.K. and Europe. What are the big similarities and differences between those two markets? How do you handle global differences in social media — or do you?**

**Andrew:** Well, we have pre-existing relationships with global financial services and insurance companies which began with our U.S. relationships. From a global perspective, these are some of the largest insurance companies in the world. They operate on a global scale, as opposed to some other U.S. firms [that] are a bit more confined to the U.S. market.

When we began to support some of our European rollouts from the U.S., European business units unanimously agreed that they are a year or two behind the U.S. in terms of social media maturity. It's kind of interesting, because they may have skipped some of the early steps where they focus a ton on brand building, and they're moving more towards the ROI of social. They're saying, "We don't want to spend two years listening globally, trying to identify who loves us and who hates us. Let's figure out what we can do that actually drives sales and revenue." They're moving faster toward that area, learning from what the rest of the world has done. So we've been supporting a number of rollouts across continental Europe — Germany, France, Switzerland, plus a couple others.

Certainly, the consistent challenges of supporting those rollouts from San Francisco and New York led to the move to London. It was an acknowledgment that the market in Europe is really almost as large, if not as large, as the U.S. market when it comes to financial institutions, both insurance and banks. We can support them much better from a local perspective as we hire individuals with local language support and understanding of the local markets.

As we're moving into Europe, we're helping companies focus on our four social business steps, which are, one, get found; two, grow your network and build that local community of friends, family, colleagues, past university classmates; three, research and act on signals by identifying those key life events; and four, build credibility as an opinion leader through relevant and timely content distribution.

But one of the important differences in Europe is making sure that we get a solid base with our early customers on those first two steps before they really move aggressively into the latter two steps in our social business best practices.

**You hit on the similarities. Europe is a couple of years behind, perhaps, but they're gaining fast. Do you find any differences in the markets?**

**Andrew:** There's a bit more skepticism in some of continental Europe, specifically in locations like Germany and Switzerland, where data security and privacy are historic issues, and they want to make sure that their reputations are protected and that none of the local laws are broken.

And what gives us an advantage in these locations is the configurable nature of our software, where you can start with just creating presences or having marketing-based conversations, without digging into significant local events.

But it's kind of impossible to deny the momentum across Europe. The local Internet population that is using Facebook is increasing about 10% every year there, and when our customers see that the atten-

tion is shifting to these channels, there is certainly acknowledgment that they need to move.

**It must be a big challenge for larger companies with compliance issues, such as financial management firms, to know how much autonomy to allow individual sales people who are setting up their own Facebook pages or Twitter feeds.**

**Andrew:** That's one of the other big things that's similar in Europe to the U.S. Salespeople are opportunistic. Individuals who represent the brand are already out there doing so, even if it's against corporate policy and even if there's no support from corporate. They recognize an opportunity and when they walk into a meeting, it very quickly switches from "our policy is that employees cannot use social media" to wanting to represent themselves online from a business perspective in the most effective way.

From early on, Hearsay Social encountered having to build compliance solutions for social media around archiving, around workflow management, around roles and entitlements for very large enterprise companies. We figured that if we're going to build software that the Fortune 500 is going to use, it needed to scale, it needed to be global, and it needed to fit into complex organizational hierarchies.

What we found is that it often depends on what the local individual is selling. If they're selling financial-related products as opposed to property and casualty insurance, the regulations are going to change based on the type of salesperson and the products they're able to sell. But at a high level, some of the regulations that apply are basic archiving of conversations. You can draw a parallel between emailing a bank or an advisor. They would need to maintain a record of that conversation that if called upon they could pull that up and show the record of the interaction.

There would be different requirements based on the industry and location of that individual, how long it needs to be retained and the methodology

about how it needs to be stored. Often it needs to be WORM compliant, which is an acronym for "write once, read many." It's a way to store data. That same model applies to social data. Some conversations may need to be stored for x amount of time.

That said, one of our products is called the Rogue Page Finder, and what it's designed to do is identify where these brands have local field agent representation across Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. We can run a report before we go into a meeting with corporate to say, "Actually, we found that you have 200 local Facebook business pages, 300 Twitter handles and a thousand LinkedIn profiles. We understand your internal corporate policy, but..."

**"... but here's what's actually happening with your salespeople."**

**Andrew:** Exactly. That's a very real scenario that was happening in the U.S. three or four years ago. Now, we're seeing that repeat a bit in Europe. For larger companies, there's a bit of a scramble. They're at the point where they know, okay, our policy isn't working and we now know we have no way to surveil against this. Are we going to completely block these networks on a global scale? Or, are we going to find a way to protect and empower?

**What do you say to skeptics who may be not as keen on the utility of the platform that you're offering?**

**Andrew:** This kind of goes back to the early reputation of social media. I would do presentations at a conference with people who were not excited to hear another social media presentation, right? Social has its reputation almost being a little bit spammy; it's about how many followers and likes can I acquire as fast as possible, and it's another place marketing can sink money into and try to justify it.

And I think that reputation was deserved in a lot of ways, where people were just replicating their corporate web presences on social presences and paying to acquire what they would consider to be fans and followers that might not be relevant in any

way to their business. They learned that if you give away an iPad, yes, people will like your page. But that's not actually helping your business.

Our method has always been about driving sales for your business through the people that do your sales. That might be sales or support staff, who might be relationship people; it might be the marketing team. The best way we are able to do this with skeptics is through tangible case studies that show an increase in sales.

And it's really no sexier than that. Sometimes it's reports that we've done with third parties to show that relationship sellers who have started to use social see a 25% lift in sales, or it's insurance companies that have closed the loop and shown that all the way from first social connection to social conversation to lead in their CRM software to a closed new policy as designated by the rep that, yes, this deal happened because of an interaction on social media.

I'll give you an example. I was in Barcelona recently and was with a company that we visited a year and a half ago. They were absolute skeptics about social media. They didn't want to do it. They didn't believe it was important for their local market. But I told them, "I think Spain has the highest level of Facebook adoption in Europe."

We convinced them to do a survey of their agents. And what they found was that, of 300 agents they surveyed randomly, I believe it was 80% said they wanted support from their corporate organization for a social media program. Those agents believed there was value, and they wanted some way to more effectively do it. And of the 300 surveyed, 60% said they were already starting to do it in some way or another.

### **What was the conversation like when they came back with the survey results? Were they suitably aghast?**

**Andrew:** Well, they very quickly admitted that they did not expect these results, but what they now believe is that the people who sell their product have spoken, and they need support.

They said, "We now need a plan and technology that allows us to do this at scale, and we can't manually implement this and monitor this and empower them one by one, so we need to find a way to do it — and you guys have bugged us long enough where it seems like you're the right partner."

### **Sales through attrition.**

**Andrew:** Exactly.

### **A question about adoption for a multinational, taking Hearsay Social across the world. How do you advise a company in one country to implement the tool in other regions of the world?**

**Andrew:** It's really important that this doesn't feel like a corporate-mandated product, because you can't corporately mandate the use of social media. The local markets must want to do it and need to be empowered to support local reps in a unique way. For example, when you're in Spain, Real Madrid content does not work in Barcelona. In fact, there would be a complete riot if it was used, and that's within one country.

Social is the most perfect example of this. If you're not listening and being aware, it can very quickly turn south on you. If you try to push a message that doesn't work locally, it has a chance of backfiring very aggressively.

The way we advise is that you would never turn on a social program and try to empower thousands or tens of thousands of people instantly. You start with local programs where there's local involvement and you identify success stories.

During an early rollout, we'll have people who have experience and also people who are brand new so that the success stories that are shared both internally and externally are relevant to people as they think about how it applies to their business. You want people to know that they don't need to be a superstar to get value out of it.

### **Gary, did you want to add something to close?**

**Liu:** Just that for our larger customers, as we've been working with them and showing progress and success, and as they continue to buy more seats for their users, they're hearing a lot of good anecdotes from the field. For many of them, the use of social for business is going from "optional" to "recommended" to "mandatory."

In addition to the ROI that Chris mentioned, it's becoming commonplace that in order to be considered credible as a salesperson in the field or as a relationship manager, you have to be able to be found on Google, whose search rankings are based in large part on social network presence. To succeed, they simply have to be where their customers are now.

***Gerald C. (Jerry) Kane** is an associate professor of information systems at the Carroll School of Management at Boston College and the MIT Sloan Management Review Guest Editor for the Social Business Big Idea Initiative.*

---

**Reprint 55304.**

**Copyright** © Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014.

*All rights reserved.*

# MIT Sloan

## Management Review

### **PDFs ■ Reprints ■ Permission to Copy ■ Back Issues**

Articles published in MIT Sloan Management Review are copyrighted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology unless otherwise specified at the end of an article.

MIT Sloan Management Review articles, permissions, and back issues can be purchased on our Web site: [sloanreview.mit.edu](http://sloanreview.mit.edu) or you may order through our Business Service Center (9 a.m.-5 p.m. ET) at the phone numbers listed below. Paper reprints are available in quantities of 250 or more.

**To reproduce or transmit one or more MIT Sloan Management Review articles by electronic or mechanical means** (including photocopying or archiving in any information storage or retrieval system) **requires written permission.**

To request permission, use our Web site:

[sloanreview.mit.edu](http://sloanreview.mit.edu)

or

E-mail: [smr-help@mit.edu](mailto:smr-help@mit.edu)

Call (US and International): 617-253-7170

Fax: 617-258-9739

**Posting of full-text SMR articles on publicly accessible Internet sites is prohibited.** To obtain permission to post articles on secure and/or password-protected intranet sites, e-mail your request to [smr-help@mit.edu](mailto:smr-help@mit.edu).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.