

Schlipf, Matthias; Baumann, Michaela

Article

Gamifying B2B Sales - An Analysis of the Status Quo and Potential for Gamification within Sales

Marketing Review St.Gallen

Provided in Cooperation with:

Universität St. Gallen, Institut für Marketing und Customer Insight

Suggested Citation: Schlipf, Matthias; Baumann, Michaela (2022) : Gamifying B2B Sales - An Analysis of the Status Quo and Potential for Gamification within Sales, Marketing Review St.Gallen, ISSN 1865-7516, Thexis Verlag, St.Gallen, Vol. 39, Iss. 4, pp. 54-62

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/276199>

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Marketing Review St.Gallen

«Cognitive Biases» im Marketing



Schwerpunkt

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Ein Interview mit Monica Dreyer &
Matthias Fuchs

Elaboration Likelihood
im E-Mail-Marketing

Cognitive Biases as Boosters –
Using Cognitive Biases to Improve
Communication Recall for
Emmi Jogurtpur

Behavioral Return Interventions –
How Behavioral Science Helps
Prevent Returns in E-Commerce

Cognitive Biases in Free-to-play Games

Spektrum

Nachhaltigkeit vermitteln
und verkaufen – Schritte zu einer
grünen Customer Journey

Gamifying B2B Sales –
An Analysis of the Status Quo and
Potential for Gamification within Sales

The Art of Social-Media-Influence –
Was es für eine erfolgreiche Kampagne
zu berücksichtigen gilt und welche
Fauxpas man besser vermeiden sollte



Gamifying B2B Sales

An Analysis of the Status Quo and
Potential for Gamification within Sales

By means of expert interviews and an online survey experiment among sales representatives, the positive potential of using gamification applications within B2B sales is shown. Based on the empirical results and a derived B2B sales framework, recommendations which gamification elements to apply for which business type and sales phase are presented.

Prof. Dr.-Ing. Matthias Schlipf, Michaela Baumann, M.Sc.

Gamification was supposedly “invented” by Nick Pelling in 2003 (Hunter & Werbach, 2012), but not widely accepted until 2010 according to the Google search history of the keyword. The term and with it the concept of gamification made its way into the Gartner Hype Cycle for Emerging Technologies, reaching the peak of inflated expectations in 2013 (Fenn & LeHong, 2013). According to Deterding et al. (2011) gamification can lead to an increase in engagement and higher productivity when implemented correctly. In 2015, it was predicted that 40% of the Global 1000 Companies would use gamified elements in their IT to encourage their employees to perform better and be more productive (Burke, 2014). At the current point in time there are no comprehensive results on how many companies have introduced gamification, with or without success, in which functions or departments. Nevertheless, gamification has already found its way into different departments and aspects of business processes – mainly human resources and operations (e.g., Sailer, 2016). A study by Kearney (2021) also provided results on the successful use of gamification in the field of commissioning, using the example of Amazon Fulfillment Centers. Here, six mini-games with relation to monotonous warehouse tasks were established and resulted in an increase in job satisfaction of up to 24% and employee motivation of up to 33%. However, one function which seems to be predestined for the use of gamification since its characteristics – such as competitiveness, measurability and passing through different target achievement stages – are key elements of the majority of games has been addressed rather rarely: sales.

Gamification and B2B Sales

Sales work is characterized by competition with rivals, transparent measurability of KPIs and often personal and social

interactions with (potential) customers. All those factors can result in discomfiting and demanding situations for the sales representatives, which is why extrinsic motivation levers such as bonuses and premiums come into play. Intrinsic motivation is often missing (Zupancic, 2019).

Gamification – meaning the “use of multiple game elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding et al., 2011, p. 2425) – however, is per se associated with the intrinsic motivation of a user (Hamari et al., 2014). In contrast to extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation occurs when the user completes a task for its own sake without experiencing any external coercion (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

A playful experience in a non-game environment cannot be established by the use of a single game element but only through the integration of multiple game elements. Following the approach of Bravo et al. (2017) where the authors collected multiple commonly used gamification mechanics with different levels of abstraction and categorized them in a taxonomy, there are six gamification mechanics the individual sub-mechanics or game elements can be assigned to:

- (1) Goals: Main reasons for user’s behavior based on their ambitions and efforts, e.g., achievement or levels.
- (2) Status: Set of achievements or skills of users that differentiate them versus the others, e.g., leaderboard, ranking or social sharing of status-updates.
- (3) Randomness: Characteristics of the game that make it seem unpredictable, e.g., gifts or surprises.
- (4) Appointments: Dynamics in which a user must fulfill a task by a predetermined time, e.g., countdowns or schedules.
- (5) Scoring: The way the users are remunerated for their work, e.g., by points, combos, or virtual goods.
- (6) Immersion: Deep mental involvement in something in the gamified context, e.g., roles or explorations.

Some of the elements have a stronger effect on intrinsic motivation than others (e.g., roles), and some of them rather have an effect on extrinsic motivation (e.g., leaderboards). Regardless of its motivational origins, gamification is intended to encourage friendly competition with oneself or with others, thereby taking the monotony out of repetitive, rather monotonous workflows. By increasing intrinsic motivation, gamification can



Prof. Dr.-Ing. Matthias Schlipf
is professor for B2B Marketing, Sales & Technology Management at the Department of Business Administration of the Munich University of Applied Sciences
matthias.schlipf@hm.edu

Michaela Baumann, M.Sc.
completed her master degree in Marketing Management at the Munich University of Applied Sciences and is now Marketing Communications Manager at Rohde & Schwarz GmbH & Co. KG
michaela.baumann@rohde-schwarz.com

positively affect performance overall, and environments that are characterized by competitiveness and performance orientation – such as the B2B sales environment – can be additional catalysts for gamification (Deterding et al., 2011). Thus, in order to examine the current status of gamification in B2B sales and show possible potentials, the authors used a mixed methods approach following four steps as described below.

Design of the Study

Theoretical Framework

In a first step, the sales management process was divided into consecutive phases and combined with different business types which are predominant in the B2B segment.

Pufahl (2019) distinguishes six phases of a generally applicable sales manage-

ment process: (1) sales planning, (2) lead management, (3) contact management, (4) inquiry management, (5) order management, and (6) aftersales. The phases are each characterized by phase-specific activities and are linked as a process chain by defined transitions to the respective downstream phase (figure 1 top). These activities form the potential starting points for a gamification application within each process phase.

In order to apply gamification elements successfully within B2B sales, the authors assumed that not only the different time- and task-orientated sales phases but also the different types of B2B goods and businesses have an influence on their utilization. Thus, the well-established and proven structuring of B2B business types by Backhaus & Voeth (2014) was used in the authors' research design. According to this approach, the following four business types are predominant in B2B: (1) product business, (2) project business,

(3) integration business, and (4) system business (figure 1 left).

In the following, the four B2B business types are combined with the six phases of the sales management process. As a result, a "B2B sales process & business type matrix" (figure 1) was deduced to which the different gamification elements could be applied.

Focus Framework

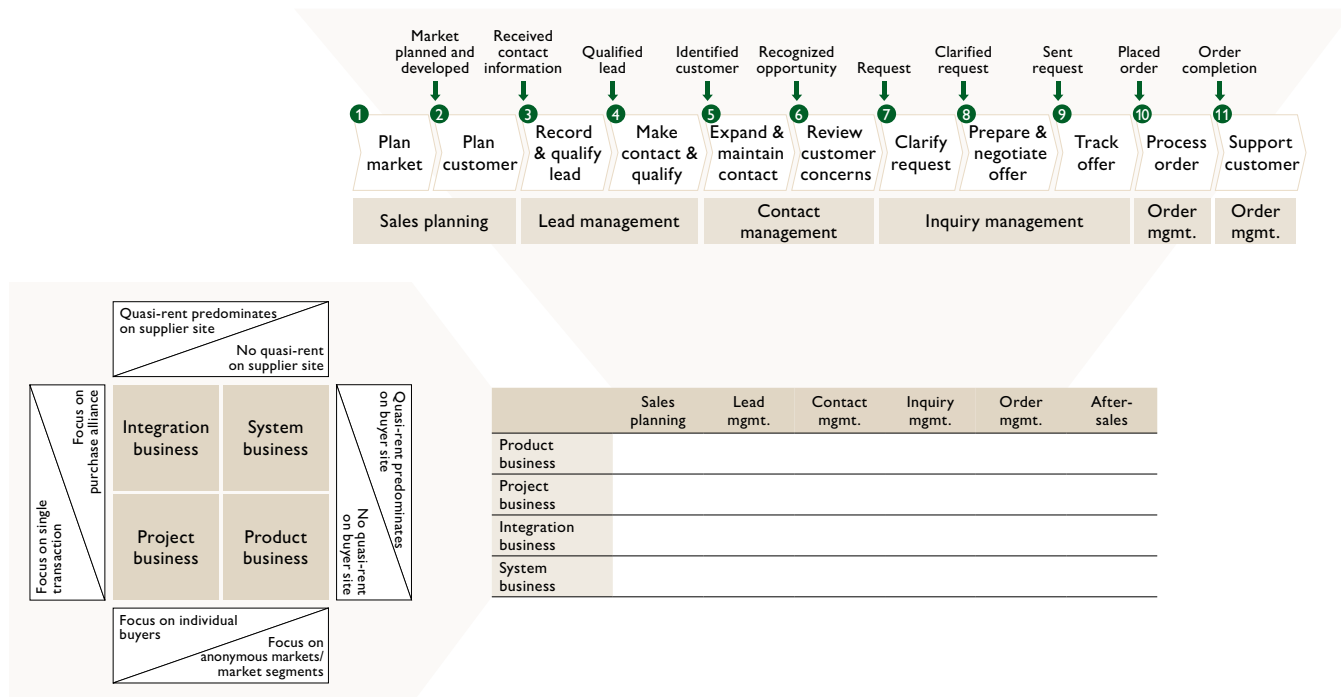
In the second step, the status quo of the use of gamification, the relevance of each phase of the sales management process and the future potential of the use of gamification in sales were evaluated by conducting guided expert interviews. When selecting the experts, the authors focused on a well-balanced population both in terms of the B2B business type and the respective position in sales of the interviewees.

The product business was represented in the interviews by a sales professional from a leading global manufacturer of products and system solutions in the construction industry and a key account manager in the component aftermarket of a renowned Swiss construction machinery manufacturer. Both interviewees from the project business worked in global business development & sales: one for a globally active German technology group for radio and communications technology, and one for a leading global supplier of robotics and system technology. The integration business was represented by a senior sales director of a globally active German high-tech photonics company and by a sales director of a Swiss manufacturer of power generators and large engines. The system business interviewees can both be assigned to the software industry: a pre-sales employee of a Munich-based software company in process mining and an account manager of the world's leading operating system supplier in the field of personal computing. The interviews were conducted in

Explanations and Examples of the Business Types

- Product business is characterized by selling standard or rather normed products for a broad and anonymous market. In this case, due to the standardization of the goods, the buyer is not bound to the supplier when purchasing the same product again (= single transaction). Screws, drilling tools or modular tooling machines may serve as examples.
- Project business is characterized by a high degree of individuality of the goods but still has a single transaction character, for example when selling a complex power plant in a certain region.
- System business is characterized by selling a modular product which is developed for an anonymous market but where the buyer is in some way bound to the supplier in the future. An example would be an IT system where the initial licensing of the system in region A of the buyer will lead to a high probability of licensing the same IT system in region B, due to the reduction of complexity and interfaces (= buying alliance).
- Integration business is similarly characterized by this kind of buying alliance, while in this case the good is characterized by a high degree of individuality (according to the customer's specification). Examples would be all kinds of products and components which only fit in one certain application of the customer, e.g., an individual car lighting system for one specific car model.

Figure 1: B2B Sales Process & Business Type Matrix



Source: Derived from Backhaus & Voeth (2014) and Pufahl (2019).

April and May 2021, lasted 40–60 minutes each, and were subsequently evaluated and analyzed using the qualitative content analysis approach of Mayring (2010).

With regard to the status quo of the use of gamification in sales, the interviews revealed that game elements and mechanics are hardly used, or if, only selectively and not specifically for the sales process. It emerged from the interviews that the potential of gamification is estimated to be higher when operating in an anonymous market than in an individualized one (product and system business). The same applies when a single transaction is targeted rather than a purchasing alliance (product and project business).

Accordingly, the product business shows the highest potential for the application of gamification overall. The interviews confirmed that the greatest potential for

gamification is seen in those phases in which personal contact with the customer is closest: lead management, contact management, inquiry management, and aftersales. Thus, sales planning and order management were not considered for further research.

For each of the four remaining phases, applications consisting of four different

gamification elements were developed and visualized based on the insights gained from the interviews. The six elements presented at the beginning of the article were used for this purpose.

For lead management (LM, figure 2, top left), the process of collecting and processing leads was taken as the core process and combined with the collection and distribu-

Management Summary

In order to evaluate the potential of gamification applications within the B2B sales management process, expert interviews with sales representatives from different business types were conducted and evaluated. Based on the interviews, gamification elements for the different sales process phases were designed and explored among sales representatives in an online survey experiment. The results of the survey show the great positive potential of gamification within B2B sales and indicate which gamification elements should be applied for which business type and sales phase.

tion of badges and the mapping of the status. In contact management (CM, figure 2, top right), the central task – to establish a personal relationship with the customer and deepen it through regular interactions – was transformed into a Tamagotchi application the sales representative has to take care of virtually. Inquiry management (IM, figure 2, bottom left), in which negotiations and tender processing play a central role, was translated into a skill tree that reflects the KPIs of the user and different fulfillment levels in negotiation management, with a corresponding status of the individual. For aftersales (AS, figure 2, bottom right), the basic principle of a lottery was adapted. The faster and more satisfactorily customer concerns can be handled and resolved, the more tickets will be received by the user, which improves the chances of winning the lottery in the end.

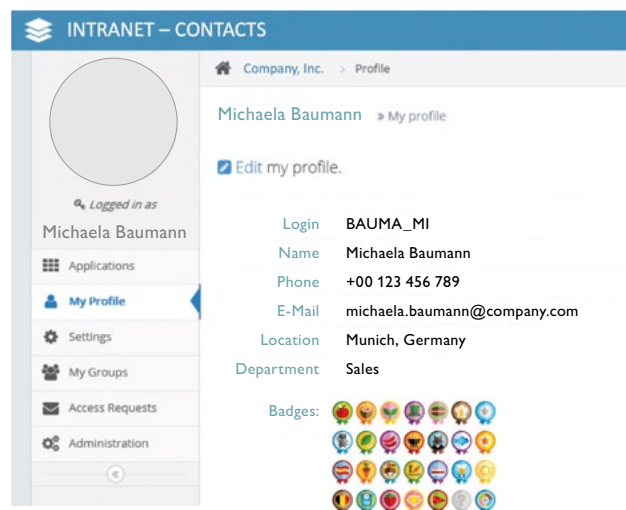
For a better understanding of how a practical solution might work, the elements used for the Tamagotchi application in contact management are now discussed in more detail. Relationship management and building trust with customers were identified as the core activities in contact management. The aspect of caring for customers was taken up in this context and translated into a gamification application based on the «Tamagotchi» electronic toy from Japan. A Tamagotchi represents a virtual pet that you have to take care of; it has needs like sleeping, eating, drinking and affection. At different times, the Tamagotchi will call out and ask for the owner's attention. This playful setting was transferred to the customer relationship: customers have certain needs, require attention and regular contact. In the example developed, each sales employee can create a Tamagotchi which is linked via the CRM system to the customer profiles for which the salesperson is responsible. The Tamagotchi is fed or influenced by data related to the respective customers, such as open tickets, calls and meetings, as well as orders and other workflows. If the sales employees do not regularly take care of their customers, e.g., if open

tickets are not processed, the Tamagotchi changes its emotion from happy to unsatisfied. If the Tamagotchi is not happy, it gives corresponding feedback on potential activities that could make it happy again, e.g., closing tickets, calling customers. This call for a mental commitment to something in the game context falls under the gamification mechanic "immersion" and is represented by the element "role play" in this example (CM1). The status

of the Tamagotchi and the exploration of the actions required to satisfy it represent the element "exploration" (CM2). If you keep the Tamagotchi happy for a long time, meaning that you take good care of the customers on a regular basis, you will receive additional virtual items as a surprise (CM3). The status of the Tamagotchi is only visible to the respective salesperson and is not disclosed to others, such as the direct supervisor, as some kind of status

Figure 2: Gamification Applications and Elements Used for the Four Identified Sales Management Phases

Application Lead Management (LM)



Contains elements:

- Achievement (LM1)
- Virtual Good (LM2)
- Leaderboard (LM3)
- Social Sharing (LM4)

Application Inquiry Management (IM)



Contains elements:

- Achievement (IM1)
- Level (IM2)
- Ranking (IM3)
- Social Sharing (IM4)

report on an employee's current customer connections. The aspect of "social sharing" (CM4) represents the fourth game element used in this example. Due to this design, the user should be more likely to perform recurring tasks such as regular customer calls, triggered by the intrinsic motivation to always have the Tamagotchi satisfied and equipped with new items. Table 2 shows that this design meets with a high level of acceptance in practice.

Empirical Framework

In a third step, the potential of these gamification applications and elements was explored in an online survey experiment with B2B sales representatives (n = 90) from Germany. The online survey was active from June 16 to July 7, 2021 and conducted anonymously via Google Forms. According to the four B2B business types, 36% of the participants

can be assigned to product business, 28% to integration business, 19% to project business and 17% to system business.

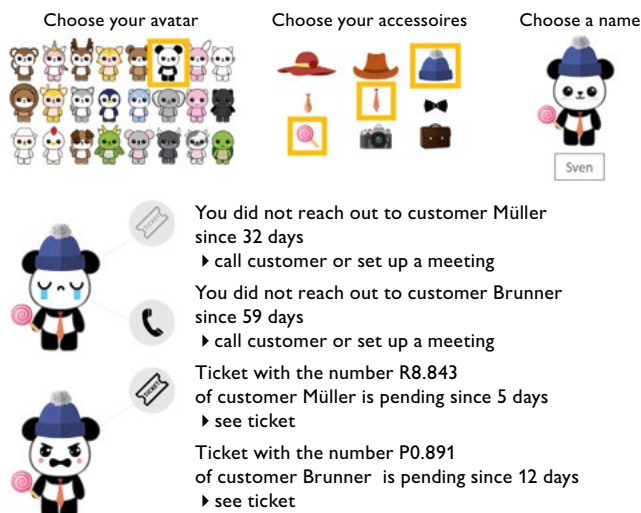
Respondents were first asked whether gamification can have a positive effect on the corresponding sales process phase, without exposing them to any examples (table 1, 1st column: unaided query). A dichotomous scale with the expressions yes, no, and I don't know was used for the response options. Subsequently, the developed gamification applications were shown, and the game mechanics were explained. The participants were then asked to rate the applied game elements individually with regard to a positive effect on the respective process phase using a five-point Likert scale. Finally, the participants were questioned again regarding an overall positive impact of gamification on the process phase after exposure to the applications (table 1, 2nd column: aided query); using the same dichotomous scale as for the first question.

The results not only reinforced the potential of gamification within the sales management phases, but also showed that the solutions demonstrated have a positive impact on the perception of gamification on sales performance (table 1, 3rd column: relative change).

For example, in lead management, 82 of the 90 participants rated the potential for gamification either positive or neutral in the unaided query; eight of the participants rated it negative. After exposure to the gamification examples, a total of 85 participants perceived gamification as having a positive or neutral influence on the process phase (+4%). Of the eight participants who did not see any potential in the unaided query, four stated in the aided query, i.e., after they had seen the example (table 1, 4th column: convincing rate) that they now see a positive influence of the gamification application on the sales process (+50%).

This "convincing effect" was even stronger in contact management: 54 participants

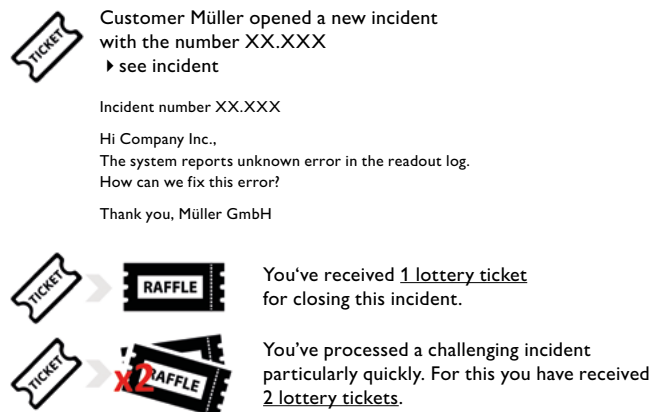
Application Contact Management (CM)



Contains elements:

- Role (CM1)
- Exploration (CM2)
- Surprise (CM3)
- Social Sharing (CM4)

Application Aftersales (AS)



Contains elements:

- Points (AS1)
- Combos (AS2)
- Countdown (AS3)
- Social Sharing (AS4)

Source: Own illustration.

Main Propositions

- 1 Key elements of gamification applications such as competitiveness, measurability and passing through different target achievement stages reflect the characteristics of sales in a particularly good manner.
- 2 Nevertheless, gamification elements and mechanics along the B2B sales management process are hardly used in practice and their successful use is underestimated by sales managers and employees.
- 3 The positive potential of gamification within B2B sales is only fully realized and accepted when concrete gamification elements are shown to the sales representatives.
- 4 There are different game mechanics and elements which match the different B2B business types and sales management phases particularly well.

stated in the unaided query that they see a negative impact of gamification on the respective phase. After exposure to the gamification elements in the aided query, the assessments of 30 participants of those 54 were subsequently positive in the aided query, which corresponds to a rate of convinced participants of 56%.

While the application for the inquiry management phase met with the approval of 28 more participants in the aided query (increase of 127% as compared to the unaided query), only 22% of the negative opinions could be converted. Overall, this application was rated the lowest by the respondents, both in the unaided and the aided query.

With regard to the aftersales phase, the participants were already optimistic about gamification in the unaided survey: 87 of 90 participants rated it as neutral or positive. Interestingly, one participant's expectations could not be met by the example. However, this application also changed one of the three negative ratings into a positive one.

Overall, the survey showed two significant results: first, the respondents were relatively positive about gamification for the lead management and aftersales phases right from the start (unaided). The examples presented to them increased this acceptance even more. Second, in the two phases where gamification met with

less acceptance at the beginning – contact and inquiry management – the greatest change in the participants' opinion could be observed. This indicates that the participants' perceptions of the potential of gamification changed significantly just by being shown tangible examples.

Recommendation Framework

In addition to the query about the potential of gamification for sales by means of the different examples (figure 2), the survey participants were asked to rate the individual elements of each application using a Likert scale. An item was considered to be found good if the participants indicated they either strongly agree or agree to this gamification element having a positive impact; it was not considered to be found good if the response was disagree or strongly disagree. To ensure validity, the respondents were filtered by applying a logic test, verifying their B2B business type via a separate question, which set the sample size to $n = 80$ instead of 90.

Across all B2B business types and the four identified sales phases the different gamification elements applied in each application were evaluated (table 2). By color-coding the approval rates (found to be good, neutral, or not found to be good), patterns could be identified. E.g., 93% of all respondents found the gamification element Achievement (= LM1) to be good

Table 1: Results of an Online Survey Experiment Among German Sales Representatives

	Unaided		Aided		Relative change	Convincing rate		
	Total Pos./neut.	Total neg.	Pos./Neut. aided	Neg. unaided	Pos./Neut. aided	Neg. unaided	thereof Pos. aided	% Change
Lead management	82	8	85	5	+4%	8	4	50%
Contact management	36	54	65	25	+81%	54	30	56%
Inquiry management	22	68	50	40	+127%	68	15	22%
Aftersales	87	3	86	4	-1%	3	1	33%

$n = 90$. Source: Own illustration.

Table 2: Relative Agreement Rates in the Online Survey per Gamification Element Dependent on Process Phase and Business Type

		Lead management				Contact management				Inquiry management				Aftersales			
		Achievement (L1)	Virtual good (L2)	Leaderboard (L3)	Social sharing (L4)	Role (C1)	Exploration (C2)	Surprise (C3)	Social sharing (C4)	Achievement (I1)	Level (I5)	Ranking (I3)	Social sharing (I4)	Points (A1)	Combos (A2)	Countdown (A3)	Social Sharing (A4)
All n=80	found to be good	93	91	45	79	70	81	41	34	49	14	66	28	96	91	46	48
	not found to be good	5	3	38	16	25	10	28	24	38	79	30	16	1	5	34	29
Product business n=32	found to be good	100	94	47	78	59	72	28	22	41	13	66	22	94	88	34	47
	not found to be good	0	3	38	13	38	19	38	34	47	81	31	22	3	6	44	38
Project business n=12	found to be good	83	92	50	92	92	92	75	33	42	0	58	8	92	100	58	50
	not found to be good	8	8	33	0	8	8	8	17	33	83	33	17	0	0	25	25
Integration business n=24	found to be good	88	83	38	63	75	83	46	54	71	29	75	50	100	88	58	54
	not found to be good	8	0	42	38	17	0	29	4	25	71	25	8	0	8	25	25
System business n=12	found to be good	92	100	50	100	67	92	33	25	33	0	58	17	100	100	42	33
	not found to be good	8	0	33	0	25	8	17	42	42	83	33	17	0	0	33	17

90–100
 70–89
 50–69
 30–49
 <30

n = 80. Source: Own illustration.

for lead management. Generally, the examples created for inquiry management were rated less favorably, which confirms the observation of the generally lowest acceptance of gamification in this phase.

Especially the lead management and aftersales phases showed strong potential for the selected gamification elements such as earning achievements (LM1) or virtual goods (LM2) and scoring points (AS1) or combos (AS2). The lowest ratings were given for status elements such as leaderboards (LM3), social sharing (CM4, IM4, AS4) and a countdown (AS4).

These results show that only positive reinforcement works in gamification within the sales environment. Encouraging the employees to be successful in their field by awarding points, achievements or goals seems to be really motivating. However, putting pressure, or

worse, public pressure, on the person is counterproductive since the employee might fear repercussions for his bad performance, by colleagues and superiors.

By transferring the visualized levels of acceptance per applied gamification element (= colored gradations in table 2) to a clearly written recommendation format, a “B2B Gamification Sales Matrix” was derived (figure 3). This matrix provides a starting point for selecting promising gamification elements for the business types and sales phases according to both the expert interviews and the results from the online survey experiment.

Summary, Conclusion and Outlook

The presented empirical study confirmed the positive potential of gamification within B2B sales which is often

Lessons Learned

- 1 In order to convince sales representatives of the positive potential of gamification and get them on board, show concrete and tangible gamification elements and examples.
- 2 Product business which is characterized by an anonymous market and low customer retention is particularly well suited for the use of gamification within B2B sales.
- 3 Lead management and aftersales are the phases within the sales management process where the successful use of gamification is most positive and therefore they should be the starting point when introducing gamification in your company.

Figure 3: B2B Gamification Sales Matrix

Business Type		Lead Management	Contact Management	Inquiry Management	Aftersales
Product Business	Dos	Achievements (quantitative + qualitative) Virtual goods Social sharing	Exploration		Points Combos
	Don'ts	Leaderboards	Surprise No social sharing	Achievements (Loading bar) Social sharing	Countdown Luck Social sharing
Project Business	Dos	Achievements (quantitative + qualitative) Social sharing	Avatar/Role Exploration Surprise		Points Combos
	Don'ts		No social sharing	Achievements (Loading bar) Level (Status) Social sharing	Luck
Integration Business	Dos	Achievements (quantitative + qualitative) Virtual goods	Avatar/Role Exploration	Achievements (Loading bar) Status display	Points Combos
	Don'ts	Leaderboards	Surprise	Social sharing	
System Business	Dos	Achievements (quantitative + qualitative) Virtual goods Social sharing	Exploration		Points Combos
	Don'ts		Surprise No social sharing	Achievements (Loading bar) Social sharing	Countdown Social sharing

Source: Derived from the Results of the Study.

neglected until concrete gamification elements are suggested. Lead management and aftersales were identified as phases in which gamification elements have the highest potential. With regard to the B2B business types only integration business shows a low potential for gamification applications. According to the authors' point of view this is also due to the fact that integration business is characterized by a high product complexity (= specificity) and an oftentimes long sales phase (including prototyping, test, and validation phases) with multiple personal interactions and negotiations, which is as yet challenging to transform into an automatized gamification application. In contrast, the product business which is characterized by single transactions and a broad and anonymous market together with a low degree of specificity of the investment goods is predestined for gamification. The derived B2B Gamification Sales Matrix can thus serve to identify which gamification elements to apply in which sales phase and for which kind of B2B business.

In order to implement gamification in the sales process landscape in the future, a first step is to identify the process steps that reduce employee engagement due to monotony. The use of proven and simple game mechanics can serve as a starting point. By testing the applications and achieving learning effects, the results can be scaled to further steps. The integration of the sales staff and especially of young employees with an affinity for games can be beneficial in this regard.

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