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Analysis of referral marketing implementation in increasing online sales

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the implementation of referral marketing in increasing online sales in a social-media-based online retail business. A qualitative approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of how referral marketing operates in practice and how it contributes to sales growth. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, involving five informants selected through purposive sampling. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The findings show that referral marketing was implemented through a structured mechanism involving referral links, discounts, reward points, and purchase credits. Its effectiveness was further supported by the use of digital platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok, which enabled recommendations to spread more quickly and personally. The study also found that recommendations from friends and family were perceived as more credible than conventional promotional messages, thereby strengthening trust, encouraging new customer acquisition, increasing repeat purchases, and supporting customer loyalty. In addition, referral marketing was perceived as relatively cost-efficient because incentives were only provided when successful transactions occurred. Therefore, referral marketing can be understood as an effective relational digital strategy for supporting online sales growth.

Keyword: online sales; marketing; referral marketing; strategy

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing in the digital era has shifted the paradigm of sales strategies, with the rise of online sales becoming a primary focus (Saputra et al., 2023). Business and industry players are increasingly adopting referral marketing techniques; a phenomenon closely linked to the rapid advancement of technology. Referral marketing has been identified as one of the most effective and efficient approaches, particularly due to its cost-effectiveness and precision targeting, making it a highly relevant strategy for various types of businesses (Kartika et al., 2024).

Referral marketing is essentially a process of promoting products or services initiated by consumers through personal recommendations. This mechanism relies on consumers' willingness to become voluntary promoters of a product or service. It can be considered an innovative method of promoting to new customers based on referrals (Indrajaya & Agustina, 2023). This statement is supported by a Nielsen survey, which revealed that 92% of people trust product or service recommendations from individuals they know. Referral marketing is a form of word-of-mouth strategy intentionally designed by companies to achieve specific goals, particularly by providing incentives to loyal customers for introducing their friends, family, and acquaintances as potential new customers (Berman, 2016a). Referral marketing has proven to be an effective method for generating high-quality sales leads for businesses (Hasan, 2017). When implemented properly, this strategy has the potential to become a powerful sales engine, significantly contributing to a company's sales success.

Referral marketing is considered one of the best techniques for all types of businesses, as it operates based on the principles of trust and customer satisfaction. This theory is supported by Kotler and Armstrong (2018), who emphasize that one of the best sources of information and sales opportunities is referrals from others. Therefore, salespeople are encouraged to be proactive in requesting recommendations for their products or services. At the same time, consumers are advised to expand their referral networks to gain more comprehensive information.

The strength of referral marketing lies in its substantial cost efficiency, making it an attractive option for companies. By offering incentives to customers who successfully refer products, whether offline or online, companies can reach their target markets more accurately and build a loyal customer base (Haque-Fawzi et al., 2022). However, there are potential weaknesses that need to be considered. Failure to deliver on promised incentives can severely damage customer trust. Furthermore, manipulated testimonials by companies may influence consumer perception of the promoted product, potentially harming the brand's long-term reputation. Therefore, this study aims to provide insights for business practitioners regarding the effective implementation of referral marketing strategies to enhance sales performance.

Although prior studies have demonstrated the importance of referral marketing, the existing literature is still dominated by research on structured referral reward programs, customer value, reward design, and promotional outcomes. Previous studies have examined referral marketing in relation to customer acquisition, customer value, successful referral behavior, and the interaction between referral marketing and price promotion, often using experiments, customer relationship management data, surveys, or large platform-level datasets (Berman, 2016; Cao et al., 2021; Eggers et al., 2022; Kuang et al., 2024; Wirtz et al., 2019). Even recent studies in social media referral marketing tend to focus on customers' willingness to participate and the effects of factors such as brand, rewards, celebrity endorsement, and social ties, rather than explaining how referral marketing is operationalized in everyday online selling practice (Jayasuriya et al., 2025).

At the same time, studies in e-commerce and social commerce consistently show that trust and electronic word-of-mouth play a significant role in shaping online purchase decisions, especially in digitally mediated and emerging-market environments (Gibreel et al., 2018; Handoyo, 2024; Y. Zhao et al., 2020). However, this stream of research does not sufficiently explain how online businesses translate referral mechanisms into actual sales growth through concrete practices such as referral links, incentives, platform selection, and relationship-based recommendations. Therefore, a contextual and methodological gap

remains regarding the real-world implementation of referral marketing in social-media-based online businesses.

This study addresses that gap by providing a qualitative and implementation-oriented analysis of referral marketing in online sales. Rather than focusing solely on referral intention, participation willingness, or platform-level promotional outcomes, this study explains how referral marketing is designed, implemented, and perceived in practice, and how these processes contribute to customer acquisition, trust formation, and sales growth.

The primary objective of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the application of referral marketing strategies in the context of online sales and to analyze their impact on business growth and customer satisfaction

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Referral Marketing

Referral marketing is a marketer-initiated strategy that encourages existing customers to recommend a product or service to potential new customers through referrals, referral links, codes, or incentives. Unlike organic word-of-mouth (WOM), which emerges naturally from customers' own experiences and initiative, referral marketing is deliberately designed and managed by firms as part of their customer acquisition strategy. Its strategic value lies in the credibility of interpersonal recommendations, since messages delivered by trusted individuals are often perceived as more persuasive than firm-generated advertising (Berman, 2016). As a result, referral marketing enables firms not only to expand market reach but also to acquire customers more efficiently and strategically.

From a theoretical perspective, referral marketing is not merely a promotional technique but also a mechanism that transforms customers' social relationships into economic value. Previous studies have shown that referred customers tend to generate higher value, exhibit lower churn, and maintain stronger long-term relationships with firms than non-referred customers. This occurs because referral-based acquisition improves the match between customer needs and product offerings while simultaneously reducing uncertainty through social endorsement (Schmitt et al., 2011; Van den Bulte et al., 2018). In this sense, referral marketing operates through both economic and relational mechanisms, as customers do not only transmit information but also provide social assurance that can influence the decisions of prospective buyers.

In digital settings, referral marketing becomes more complex because it is embedded in online platforms, social media interactions, and broader network structures. Its effectiveness is influenced not only by the presence of incentives but also by the quality of social ties, network position, and the design of the communication channel. Evidence from online platforms shows that referral marketing can increase sales performance; however, its effectiveness may decline when combined with heavy price promotions, as excessive promotional emphasis can reduce the credibility of the referral itself. Likewise, studies on digital referral campaigns indicate that network characteristics, such as tie strength and social proximity, play an important role in product adoption. Therefore, referral marketing in online environments should be understood as a socially embedded and digitally mediated strategy rather than a simple incentive-based promotional tool (Cao et al., 2021; Eggers et al., 2022).

2.2. Word-of-Mouth, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, and Trust

The influence of referral marketing on online sales growth can be better understood by integrating the concepts of WOM, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and trust. In digital environments, e-WOM expands the reach of interpersonal recommendations through social media, online reviews, discussion forums, and other internet-based communication channels. Prior research shows that information quality, credibility, usefulness, and adoption are critical factors determining whether e-WOM can influence consumers' purchase intentions (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Y. Zhao et al., 2020). In other words, recommendations do not automatically lead to purchasing decisions; they must first be perceived as relevant, credible, and useful by potential buyers.

Trust plays a particularly important role in social commerce, where transactions are shaped by peer-generated content, platform familiarity, and social interaction. Existing studies demonstrate that social commerce constructs, such as forums and communities, ratings and reviews, and recommendations and referrals, contribute to the development of consumer trust, which subsequently strengthens purchase intention. In this context, trust can be viewed as the key explanatory link between referral exposure and online buying behavior. When prospective consumers perceive a recommendation as authentic and socially credible, their uncertainty decreases and their confidence in the product or seller increases. Thus, the success of referral marketing depends not only on the recommendation itself but also on its capacity to generate trust in a digital environment (Gibreel et al., 2018; Hajli, 2015; Hajli et al., 2017).

2.3. Online Sales Growth

Online sales refer to the process of buying and selling products or services through digital platforms without requiring direct face-to-face interaction. However, in the context of this study, online sales should not be understood merely as transactional activity. Rather, online sales growth reflects broader business outcomes, including the acquisition of new customers, expansion of market reach, improvement in conversion rates, and the strengthening of customer relationships through digital channels (Hajli et al., 2017; Y. Zhao et al., 2020). Therefore, online sales growth is better interpreted as the result of an interactive process involving marketing strategy, relational influence, and digital communication.

Recent research in e-commerce and social commerce consistently shows that trust and e-WOM are among the most significant determinants of online purchasing behavior. Meta-analytic evidence confirms that trust, perceived risk, perceived security, and e-WOM all significantly influence consumers' purchasing decisions in digital commerce. This suggests that referral marketing is more likely to contribute to online sales growth when it succeeds in building trust, reducing uncertainty, and delivering recommendations that are perceived as credible (Berman, 2016a; Handoyo, 2024). Accordingly, online sales growth in this study is understood as an outcome of referral-driven customer acquisition, trust formation, and the conversion of purchase intentions into actual transactions in digital channels.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

Based on the preceding literature, this study proposes that referral marketing influences online sales growth through a relational and digital mechanism. At the initial stage, referral marketing is reflected in the use of referral links, incentives, and customer participation in recommending products to others. These mechanisms stimulate the diffusion of WOM and e-WOM through personal networks and social media platforms. At the process stage, recommendation credibility, tie strength, and trust reduce uncertainty among potential buyers and increase their willingness to consider and purchase the recommended product. At the outcome stage, these processes contribute to online sales growth through broader market reach, new customer acquisition, stronger conversion, and more sustainable customer relationships. Accordingly, the conceptual relationship in this study can be summarized as follows (See Figure 1)

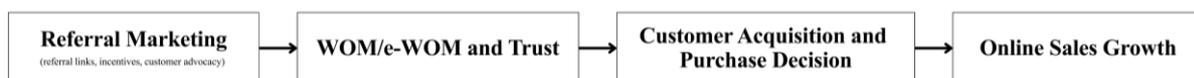


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

This framework makes the relationship between the literature and the empirical findings more explicit, while also positioning referral marketing as a process that connects social influence, digital interaction, and commercial outcomes.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine the implementation of referral marketing in online sales. The research was conducted in a social-media-based, product-oriented online retail business operating in the local market of Merauke. The business primarily used Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok, supported by pamphlets, to promote products and interact with customers. This context was considered relevant because customer recommendations, trust, and digital communication played a central role in the sales process.

Five informants were selected through purposive sampling, consisting of business actors and customers directly involved in referral marketing activities. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Triangulation across data sources was applied to enhance the credibility of the findings.

4. RESULT

4.1. Implementation of Referral Marketing

4.1.1. Referral Mechanism and Incentive Design

The findings show that the producer implemented referral marketing through a structured incentive-based mechanism. Existing customers were provided with a referral link that could be shared with potential buyers. When new customers used the link to complete a purchase, existing customers received a 10% discount and reward points that could later be exchanged for certain products. At the same time, new customers obtained an IDR 25,000 credit for future transactions.

As one informant explained, “We use referral links because they make it easier to track who brings in new buyers, and the discount plus reward points encourage existing customers to share the product more actively”. This statement indicates that referral marketing in the studied business was not implemented merely as informal recommendation behavior, but as a designed customer acquisition strategy. The incentive structure encouraged existing customers to actively participate in product promotion, while also reducing the initial purchase barrier for new customers. As a result, the referral program created reciprocal value for the producer, existing customers, and newly acquired customers.

4.1.2. Platforms and Communication Channels

The findings further reveal that referral marketing was primarily carried out through digital platforms, especially Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok, with Instagram identified as the most dominant medium. These platforms enabled direct and personalized communication between customers and potential buyers, which strengthened the dissemination of referral messages. In addition, pamphlets were still used as supporting promotional media in the local context.

This was reflected in one informant’s statement: “Instagram is the most effective platform for our referral program because customers can share information quickly and communicate more personally with potential buyers”. The use of multiple communication channels suggests that referral marketing in this business relied not only on technological accessibility but also on the ability to reach consumers through familiar and socially embedded platforms. In this context, social media functioned as an effective channel for amplifying recommendations while preserving the personal nature of referral interactions.

4.1.3. Customer Participation and Trust-Based Response

Interview findings indicate that customers were more likely to respond positively to recommendations delivered by close social ties, such as friends or family members who had already used the product. These recommendations were perceived as more convincing and relevant than conventional promotional messages, particularly when customers were unfamiliar with the product.

One customer informant stated, “Recommendations from friends or family feel more convincing than regular advertisements because they come from people who have already tried the product.” Another informant similarly noted, “I was interested in buying through the referral link because the recommendation came from someone I knew, and the additional purchase credit made the offer more attractive”. These findings show that customer participation in referral marketing was strongly influenced by interpersonal trust. Referral messages were effective not simply because information was shared, but because they were delivered by socially credible sources. Thus, trust emerged as a central factor shaping customer response and the persuasiveness of referral communication.

4.1.4. Perceived Effectiveness of Referral Marketing

The findings consistently suggest that referral marketing was perceived as effective in supporting business growth. Informants emphasized that this strategy was more accurate in reaching potential consumers and more efficient than conventional promotional channels. Personal recommendations were considered more influential than mass-media-based promotions because they were able to combine credibility, relevance, and direct interaction.

Overall, the implementation of referral marketing in this study can be understood as a digital business strategy that combines incentive design, social media communication, and interpersonal trust to expand market reach and stimulate purchasing decisions.

4.2. Online Sales Growth

4.2.1. Transaction Growth and New Customer Acquisition

The findings indicate that online sales growth was reflected in the increasing number of transactions and the growing number of new customers. Informants reported that existing customers not only made repeat purchases but also played an active role in introducing the product to potential consumers through referrals. The incentives offered by the producer encouraged them to participate more actively in this process.

This pattern was highlighted by one business-side informant, who stated, “Most of our new customers came through referrals, and many of them made repeat purchases because they already trusted the product from the beginning”. New customers acquired through referral programs were therefore considered valuable because they tended to enter the purchasing process with prior trust in the product. This suggests that referral marketing did not merely generate traffic or attention, but contributed directly to customer acquisition and transaction growth.

4.2.2. Customer Loyalty and Relationship Quality

The findings also show that customers obtained through referrals were more likely to develop trust in the product from the beginning of their interaction with the business. Because the recommendation came from trusted individuals, these customers were more inclined to make repeat purchases and maintain an ongoing relationship with the seller.

This implies that referral marketing contributed not only to short-term sales outcomes but also to relationship quality and customer loyalty. Therefore, the growth generated through referral marketing was not only quantitative, in terms of transaction volume, but also relational, in terms of stronger customer attachment.

4.2.3. Cost Efficiency and Brand Visibility

Another important finding is that referral marketing was perceived as relatively cost-efficient. Incentives were only provided when transactions were successfully generated, making the strategy more targeted than broad promotional spending. Informants also suggested that repeated recommendations helped expand brand recognition and product visibility among wider consumer groups.

These findings indicate that referral marketing supported online sales growth through two interrelated outcomes: economic efficiency and broader market exposure. In this sense, the strategy contributed not only to conversion but also to the strengthening of brand presence in the digital marketplace.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Referral Marketing as a Structured Incentive-Based Strategy

The findings indicate that referral marketing in this study operated as a structured customer acquisition strategy rather than as spontaneous recommendation behavior. The use of referral links, discounts, reward points, and purchase credits shows that the business deliberately designed a mechanism to encourage existing customers to participate in promotion. This finding reinforces the view that referral reward programs can improve customer advocacy and strengthen loyalty when the incentive structure is perceived as beneficial and directly linked to actual referral outcomes. In this case, the incentive system did not merely motivate sharing behavior, but also created reciprocal value for both existing and new customers, thereby making referral marketing more sustainable as a digital business strategy (Kuester & Benkenstein, 2014; Peng et al., 2023).

5.2. Digital Platforms as Enablers of Referral Diffusion

Another important finding is that referral marketing was strongly supported by digital communication platforms, particularly Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok. These platforms did not function only as promotional channels, but also as environments in which referral messages could circulate quickly, personally, and interactively. This finding is consistent with prior studies showing that consumer-generated social referrals can directly influence sales performance in social commerce contexts. It also suggests that the success of referral marketing depends not only on the existence of incentives, but also on the choice of digital platforms that allow recommendations to be shared in a socially embedded and user-friendly manner (Kim & Kim, 2018; L. Zhao et al., 2023).

5.3. Trust and Tie Strength as the Main Mechanism of Influence

The results also show that the effectiveness of referral marketing was rooted primarily in trust. Recommendations delivered by friends or family members were considered more convincing than conventional promotional messages, especially when potential buyers had limited prior knowledge of the product. This suggests that referral marketing influences online purchasing decisions not simply through exposure, but through socially credible and relationally embedded communication. Previous research similarly shows that customer-to-customer eWOM affects purchase intention through credibility and information adoption, while tie strength plays an important role in shaping the persuasive value of recommendations. In addition, source credibility, especially trustworthiness, expertise, and homophily has been shown to significantly affect consumers' behavioral responses in digital environments (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Tien et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018).

5.4. Referral Marketing and Online Sales Growth

The study further demonstrates that referral marketing contributed to online sales growth through increasing transactions, attracting new customers, and encouraging repeat purchases. Importantly, customers acquired through referrals appeared to enter the buying process with a higher level of initial trust, which strengthened their tendency to repurchase and maintain a relationship with the business. This finding supports research in social commerce suggesting that trust, satisfaction, and engagement are closely linked to repurchase intention and positive word-of-mouth. It also aligns with evidence that social commerce environments affect purchase intention through customer-to-customer interaction and perceived value. Thus, the present study extends the literature by showing how referral marketing functions in practice as a relational pathway from customer advocacy to sales conversion and loyalty formation (Liu et al., 2021; Meilatinova, 2021; Molinillo et al., 2020).

5.5. Cost Efficiency and Broader Market Exposure

Another key contribution of the findings lies in the perception that referral marketing is relatively cost-efficient. Because incentives are only granted when a transaction is successfully generated, promotional spending becomes more targeted than broad-based advertising. At the same time, repeated recommendations from customers help expand product visibility and reach wider audiences through social interaction. This finding is important because it suggests that referral marketing should be understood not only as a low-cost promotional technique, but also as a strategic mechanism for reducing uncertainty, strengthening visibility, and enhancing consumers' behavioral intention in digital commerce. Prior studies similarly show that positive social signals reduce uncertainty in social commerce, while trust and platform characteristics consistently shape behavioral intention across different adoption stages (Kanani & Glavec-Geo, 2021; L. Zhao et al., 2023).

5.6. Theoretical Contribution of the Study

Taken together, these findings clarify the mechanism through which referral marketing influences online sales growth. The evidence suggests that referral marketing becomes effective when three elements work together: a clear incentive structure, socially credible recommendations, and platform-enabled communication. In this sense, the findings contribute to the literature by moving beyond a narrow focus on referral intention or reward design alone and by showing how referral marketing is implemented in an actual social-media-based online retail context. The study therefore positions referral marketing as a relational digital strategy that connects customer advocacy, trust formation, and commercial outcomes in an integrated process (Kim & Kim, 2018; Meilatinova, 2021).

6. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that referral marketing is an effective strategy for increasing online sales in a social-media-based online retail business. Its effectiveness is shaped by the combination of structured incentives, digital platform use, and trust-based recommendations from socially close individuals. The findings show that referral marketing contributed to transaction growth, new customer acquisition, repeat purchases, customer loyalty, broader market exposure, and cost efficiency.

Practically, the study implies that businesses should integrate referral programs more systematically into their digital marketing strategies by designing transparent, simple, and mutually beneficial referral mechanisms. Academically, this study contributes to the literature by showing that referral marketing works not only through incentives, but also through trust, interpersonal recommendation, and platform-enabled communication. Future research is recommended to examine referral marketing across different industries and locations, and to explore the psychological and behavioral factors influencing customers' willingness to make referrals.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

Not Applicable

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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