

Exploring brand research in the social media sphere (guest blog)

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How do you feel about this?

If we were to map our online behaviour we would be presented with an interesting reflection of our offline lives. So it is only natural that companies are starting to leverage vast amounts of easily available end-user-generated content in order to get a good idea of real market trends. New research suggests that measuring that kind of 'sentiment' is getting more sophisticated.

This report by Polis intern Faith Malmer.

More and more people are spending their time on the Internet. It's often the first place they look to for unbiased advice on what products to buy, where to go on holiday, where to find the best deals. Many of us are blogging, tweeting, facebooking, and sharing on a daily basis.

We've seen social media employed commercially in various ways. In August 2011, Guardian journalist Paul Lewis used Twitter to cover the London riots. At the other side of the spectrum lies a social media genre dedicated to product reviews.

Take, for example, the explosion of cosmetics blogs, personal sites, and Youtube channels typically driven by young females who create online demos, reviewing and recommending products in the process. Major producers are scrambling to get their attention in a bid to gain subjective approval and subsequently boost sales.

Operating along those lines, Internet research companies like Human Digital are increasingly focussing on social media and crowdsourcing as a way of gleaning important information on consumer behaviour.

Liam O'Neill, a former student on the MSc Media and Communications programme at LSE, won the 2010 Polis Social Media Research award that included an internship with Human Digital. His project proposed an emotional-versus-rational focus in pinpointing motivations behind online postings on a certain product.

Speaking at the annual Polis Social Media Reality Check event, Liam explained how he used the quantitative and qualitative skills gained from his studies to analyse a sample of 500 comments found through Google and other popular sites about the Blackberry Playbook. The results, he added, can be used to aid product development, better understand consumer needs, and offer alternative perspectives.

However, I had to ask whether comment authenticity has ever been an issue – with a possibility of producing misleading results – since PR employees commonly pose as users, the anonymity of the Internet allowing them to fake unbiased reviews.

Liam insists that social media is self-regulating. 'You can't put anything past the Internet', he said, adding that dishonest comments usually don't survive for very long and are easy to spot.

For those who remember, this is very similar to the argument made by Paul Lewis during his Media Agenda Talk at the LSE back in October, referring to the 'wisdom of users' in dispelling false information about the riots.

This seems logical enough: Glowing reviews tend to stick out like a sore thumb and those well-versed in the informal ways of the online world will recognise fairly quickly that these ought simply to be ignored.

Yet where exactly is the scientific certainty in this? Isn't there a danger that a significant number will slip through the

net anyway – more than a large sample or margin of error would compensate for?

This brings up a host of questions about the limits of social media. In many ways, crowdsourcing is very similar to traditional marketing research – just, it seems, easier to access compared to traditional surveys or focus groups.

A classic pattern in product innovation is that the customer is definitely not always right. In fact, paying too much attention to consumer desires and perceived needs can be an obstacle to innovation.

Groundbreaking inventions like the microwave or frozen food encountered considerable resistance at the initial stage as surveys showed that consumers felt no need for them. Now, many of us can't live without them.

Having said that, it really remains to be seen exactly how effective social media is for brand/product development. Many companies are still hesitant to jump on the social media bandwagon. Some dismiss it as hype while others are uncomfortable with publicly viewable comments falling outside the control of image-obsessed PR officers and ad men.

Google a company and, in addition to its sleek website, the results will lead you to its Wikipedia page where you can learn how its product caused a massive outbreak of food poisoning a couple of years ago, or how its CEO was embroiled in one of the biggest sex scandals of the decade.

Social media, in its simplest form, is about individual and collective self-representation on a globally accessible scale, and can be a viable counterforce to the dominant narratives of public bodies and commercial organisations.

As the world starts to explore the potential of social media in its fledgling years, it will be interesting to see in what novel ways it continues to be used. But perhaps one of the most interesting things is what exactly the 'social' in social media will come to mean over time as user-generated content becomes increasingly commodified.

This report by Polis intern Faith Malmer

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