

Measuring Digital Word of Mouth

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As more brands fold the various channels of social media into their online marketing efforts, marketers seek to better understand the impact their programs are achieving. Significant energy and effort is focused on this area in order to better calibrate their programs to tap into, harness and maximize online conversations, which are at the heart of social media.

Today, such measurement isn't clear-cut. But the outlook is promising.

Unlike traditional marketing, measuring online engagement is ill-defined, and marketers are still not quite sure what they need to measure, or even what a good metric is. From the outset, it's important to make a distinction between "traditional" online marketing and programs incorporating social media tools. When it comes to online conversation and engagement, the difference is between *paid* engagement (click through ads, banner ads, etc.) and *earned* engagement (blogs, forums, microblogs, social networks, etc.). **And earned engagement fairly equals social media engagement.**

Where marketers today are well versed in measuring paid engagement (read: advertising), the ability to measure the impact of earned online engagement—conversations driven by word of mouth—is far less advanced, with most relying on one or more automated technology solutions to gauge the amount of chatter about a brand. There are a number of existing tools—ranging from Technorati to Radian 6 to IceRocket—that allow agencies and clients alike to set up a dashboard to track the level of conversations about a brand, trends around keywords, and even keyword-driven sentiment analysis.

The problem is that this is one-dimensional—quantity—and even for that one dimension there is no industry standard to measure the impact of social media marketing. Consequently, marketers fall back on metrics with which they are familiar and comfortable—impressions, reach, etc.

What is really needed is a way to evaluate, measure and track a brand's online presence multi-dimensionally; a measure that will show not only the quantity of conversation, but also quality; the level of interaction and the depth of message penetration and saturation.

Measurement of elusive entities

Some things can be measured to astounding degrees of precision. Conversation, online or off, is not one of these entities. Yet there is a definite need to gauge the extent of online brand conversation in order to assess brand health and the effectiveness of marketing efforts. A good measure is both valid, meaning that it measures what it claims to measure, and reliable, meaning that measuring the same thing at a different time will lead to the same result. If the underlying entity has changed, a reliable measure will capture the change in a way that comparisons can be made over time.

What would a measurement have to include to assess online brand conversation with a reasonable degree of validity and reliability? If we simply took a count of brand mentions on a search engine such as Google or Yahoo, what would we be measuring? What would we be missing? A brand name can show up in search results for a number of reasons without being the topic of a conversation. Incidental mentions, such simply being available for sale at an online retailer or being mentioned in a press release or annual report will lead to inclusion in search results. A marketing campaign can lead to a lot of mentions, but these are one-way communications, not conversations. Brand names can have multiple meanings, such as Starbucks, which in addition to being a brand of coffee, is a location, a corporation, and a character in Battlestar Galactica and Moby Dick. Search engines like Google and Yahoo don't distinguish these types of mentions from mentions in social media, such as blog posts or Facebook. They also don't allow tracking over specific time periods.

Brand conversations occur via email, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, blogs, and image based sites such as Flickr and YouTube. With the exception of email, these media can be monitored fairly easily through tools such as Icerocket and Technorati. The starting point is the volume of mentions in conversation, which tells us how much the brand is being talked about, and can be useful when making comparisons at different times or to other brands. However, quantity alone isn't enough. It's also important to assess how the conversation is spreading across different people. Are many people involved, or just a few? Are conversations shared? How many people react to a conversation by commenting, forwarding, or posting photos? This dimension captures the viral aspect of brand conversation.

The tone of the conversation should be monitored to determine whether the firm should take action to amplify the message, correct misinformation, or continue the current program. Tone can be assessed through reviewing a sample of messages or through automated sentiment analysis.

Finally, to judge whether the marketing message is getting through to consumers, there should be some sort of "resonance check." Do the intended messages show up in the conversation? A search for key terms in consumer generated content will demonstrate whether the message is penetrating the clutter.

Given these aspects of conversation (volume of conversation, number of participants, tone and content), a measure can be derived that can be tracked over time as well as compared to competing brands. However, it's important to recognize that these components are bound to be full of error. Checks are needed to determine the ratio of signal to noise, so a conversation about a television character isn't confused with a conversation about coffee, as in the Starbucks example mentioned above. It's also important to focus on conversation about the brand, not the product category. Extended topics may be a good source of insight for other purposes, but won't tell you how effective a marketing campaign has been.

The Nature of Online Conversations: Earned vs Paid

The objective of the analysis outlined here is to measure earned conversation rather than sponsored conversation or paid efforts. Paid efforts such as pay-per-post, pay-per-tweet, and online advertising provide short-term impressions meant to increase awareness. In contrast, earned conversations are those consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-brand engagements likely to foster long-term, sustainable awareness for a brand.

By focusing on the social tools predominantly populated by consumer-generated conversation and media, it is possible to measure earned conversation. An effective measurement tool needs to analyze data pulled from authentic consumer spaces as well as to filter and verify the credibility of that information as earned, not paid, at each step in the process.

The current state of online social media measurement

As the movement to understand and measure what is being said online has become more mainstream, a number of credible tools have surfaced. Most free tools provide specific search capabilities; Technorati searches and ranks blogs; Omgili searches and ranks forums. Still other, more comprehensive, subscription-based tools have surfaced such as Radian6, BuzzLogic, BuzzMetrics, and Collective Intellect that provide a more thorough analysis of what is being said across multiple channels.

What all of these tools—both subscription and free-- provide are reliable feeds of user-generated content. As listening tools, each excels at pulling and indexing content across channels, likely due to a common technology foundation. As reporting tools, each provides its own way of reporting metrics for the frequency of conversations over time.

Subscription-based tools take this a step further by calculating metrics for reach and relative influence. These tools attempt to rank the influence of different sources of conversation through proprietary formulas that account for engagement indicators, such as the number of on-topic in-bound links and the activity of these articles, illustrated by metrics such as comments per post.

Although each method for scoring the influence of a post has its inherent advantages, the common disadvantage to all of these proprietary systems is the very nature of their uniqueness. There is no standard system for understanding and ranking the value of an article. Due to the private nature of the equations, the transparency required for an industry standard or set of best practices is not addressed. To further the industry conversation toward standardization for social media valuation, an open alternative (or process) is needed.

Toward industry standardization through three key metrics

To drive conversation and actionable innovation in the space of social media measurement, Zocalo Group, with the assistance of DePaul University marketing faculty, has incorporated best of class analysis tools from across the social media spectrum to create an integrated measurement methodology that enables analysis, synthesis and evaluation of a brand's online presence. It is called the Digital Footprint Index, and goes beyond simply tracking the quantity of online conversations, but quantifies the level of engagement and interaction consumers have with brand-related content and the level of message penetration and sentiment.

Digital Footprint Index

The **DFI** quantitatively measures, scores and tracks the progress of online engagement. The DFI consists of three separate but inter-related components: height, width and depth. These measures answer the central questions of a social media strategy:

- Height: how much is the brand talked about and where is conversation occurring?
- Width: how is the brand shared and interacted with online, and how active are the communities within which conversations take place?
- Depth: is the brand understood and talked about in the way it wants?

The DFI helps pinpoint not only the quantity of conversation about a brand, but also those channels where engagement is occurring and how well people understand and share the things the brand wants them to. By analyzing these elements from month to month, an online engagement program using social media can be recalibrated to maximize impact.

Height - Height is the simplest method for determining how much content is out there over the course of 30 days about a brand. Height is the sum of the blog posts, forum threads, videos, photos, and social networking groups and pages. Excluded are channels such as Google that contribute redundancy as well as paid efforts. The number is absolute, and is a common metric with all social media monitoring and analysis tools. Height answers the question, "*How much is your brand being talked about?*"

For example, a brand working to promote itself through online video may have ten clips uploaded to a video sharing site such as YouTube. A simple method for calculating Height in this instance would be to count the quantity of videos online - ten.

Width - Where Height provides how much content has been created about a brand, Width is the metric by which consumers' engagement with that content is measured. Width is the sum of engagement metrics for each channel analyzed in Height. Comments, Thread Replies, Video views, and Twitter Followers each contribute to this value. Width answers the question, "*How widely is your brand conversation being engaged with and shared?*"

For example, the brand sharing messaging through the ten videos referenced above would look to the total number of views, favorites, and comments to measure the Width of their footprint. An understanding of these metrics provides the brand with an understanding of the effectiveness of their videos. Ten videos, each with 100 views, could arguably equate to 1 video with 1,000 views.

Depth - Depth takes the analysis into an additional dimension that accounts for the semantic value of the content to the brand by looking at whether the message was on target with messaging objectives and whether the message was positive, neutral, or negative. Although several solutions for automation of sentiment analysis are available, it has been our experience that multi-coder hand sampling remains the most dependable method for evaluating conversation when it comes to correctly identifying complexities of irony, sarcasm, and context. Depth answers the question, "Are people talking about the brand in the ways it wants them to?"

For example, of the ten videos on YouTube, not all may be of a positive benefit for the brand. By reviewing each of the videos and the sentiment of the user-generated comments, it is possible to understand whether the impact of the videos with positive or negative.



The combination of these three dimensions provides a transparent process through which social media conversations can be analyzed and quantified. *Further, it helps to assess how well brand-related content is working in a brand's favor, where content is having an impact, and where marketing efforts may be recalibrated to amplify impact.*

Because the process is independent of any specific tools, using either subscription or open, the data needed to calculate the Height, Width, and Depth are widely available through any number of tools.

The Digital Footprint Index is meant to forward standardization and analysis around the effective influence of online conversation in a transparent, comparable manner. Further, sharing the process with the industry catalyzes the measurement conversation, removes the obstacle of proprietary measurement systems unique to each vendor, and opens the path to collaboration in the space of social media measurement.

Evaluating the results – Context is Everything

There is both an art and science behind evaluating the results of a brand's digital footprint. As a mix of both qualitative and quantitative metrics, the evaluator's role is akin to that of a storyteller. The results for Height, Width, and Depth each illustrate their own narrative for how a brand is being talked about online. Contrasted and juxtaposed with one another, even deeper insights may be drawn that tell the holistic story.

The result of the DFI is best understood if contextualized with competitors, and taken sequentially over time to compare past results to present. Given a Height, Width, Depth, or Aggregate Digital Footprint Index, the only way to ascertain the value of that number is to compare it to the industry in a competitive analysis and to monitor changes over time to understand the dynamics of the brand conversation.

For example, a total index of 3,000 is neither good nor bad. Interpretation of this number is entirely dependent upon the competitive context [Industry] and the historical trend of each component leading to the measurement.

For this reason, the Digital Footprint Index is always calculated with intermittent competitive benchmarks to demonstrate how the primary brand's performance compares with the industry. Further, the value of the DFI analysis increases with each subsequent index. Time represents a key element that through monthly indexes provides increasing detail behind the relationships between Height, Width, and Depth.

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