

IN THIS ISSUE

Proceed with Caution
Using social media carefully to listen to consumers

NEW REPORT



Marketing Outlook 2009

The 2009 Marketing Outlook Report, the largest independent assessment of senior marketing executives today, is a global benchmarking initiative undertaken annually by the CMO Council. Given the economic challenges and market pressures worldwide, this year's review of '08 performance and '09 challenges and intentions is far deeper and wider than before. The results of this study are extremely valuable to all participants seeking peer-level input and consensus on critical issues and priorities.

[Download report »](#)

FEATURED PROGRAM



For over 100 years, loyalty programs have attempted to secure consumer wallet-share by providing incentives for repeat business and rewards for retained relationships. **Getting a Business Lift from Loyalty** will audit and assess the operation and innovation in loyalty club programs, the value and utilization of customer data to drive response rates and revenue, and the mobilization of loyalty club members as active agents and advocates for

FEATURE ARTICLE

Proceed with Caution: Use Social Media Carefully to Listen to Consumers

By *Denise Lee Yohn*, brand as business™ consulting partner

Have you heard what's hot lately? It's the latest marketing trend. Using social media to listen to consumers, that is.

The spotlight has recently shone on companies like Jet Blue, UPS, and Southwest for having used social media to learn about their customers' problems and to respond to them quickly. Such attention makes sense. After all, participation in Twitter, Facebook, and other social media is growing exponentially and popular brands like the National Basketball Association have amassed huge social media audiences – why not pay attention to all of that's being said to and about your brand?

Plus these new platforms channel customer information to companies on an ongoing, real-time basis. Rather than waiting weeks or months for research or financial results to paint an outdated and oftentimes fuzzy picture of consumer sentiment, companies can now identify opportunities or learn about problems as they arise and take action immediately.

But there are some risks involved in using social media for consumer input and companies would be wise to proceed with caution into the fast lane of tweets and posts. Here are three suggestions for how to use social media carefully to listen to consumers:

1. Be selective about who you listen to.

Engaging in social media can be like drinking from a fire hose – the quantity of information is overwhelming. Twitter alone now has over 7 million unique visitors and there were approximately 240 tweets per person in the last quarter of 2008¹. It can be difficult to determine who and what you should be paying attention to.

That's why you should stay focused on your target audience and ensure you are only listening to that group and those who have strong influence with them. Case in point: Lightspeed Research recently conducted a market research survey after a social media outcry over an offending ad by Motrin caused the company to discontinue the ad and issue a public apology. Although the blogosphere was ablaze about the topic, the research revealed that almost 90% of women had never seen ad – and once they did, only 15% said they didn't like it.²

So it's important to take the time to filter out voices that may be loud but that don't impact your business. Thanks to new applications like TweetDeck, it's becoming easier to separate out the opinions that matter to you. Also different social media are frequented by different groups – so be sure you're listening in the right places.

In some cases it might not even make sense to engage with social media as a customer input tool for now. Historically social media users have been early adopters of technology and media. Although the audiences are now becoming more mainstream, it's important to monitor your target audience's usage of social media and tailor your approach accordingly.

acquiring new or repeat business.

[Learn more »](#)

READING

Understanding Digital Marketing: Marketing strategies for engaging the digital generation



The world of digital media is changing at a phenomenal pace. Constantly evolving technologies, and their evolving uses, are transforming how we access information and how we interact and communicate with one another on a global scale. *Understanding Digital Marketing* looks at the world of digital marketing: how it got started, how it got to where it is today, and where the thought leaders in the industry believe it is headed in the future.

[Available from Amazon »](#)

Experiential Marketing: A practical guide to interactive brand experiences



Consumers are constantly inundated with repetitive traditional advertising messages, bombarding their lives, interrupting their TV shows and generally getting in the way. Consumer feel little emotional connection with these brands, and if they are persuaded to buy it is simply because the brand that shouted the loudest got their attention. This outdated approach to marketing communications is dying--fast. To gain lasting customer loyalty, brands must give something back.

[Available from Amazon »](#)

2. Understand the limitations of social media.

In addition to over- and under-representing certain groups of people, social media has other inherent limitations.

First, user comments are usually not detailed or in-depth. They may illuminate surface-level problems or opportunities which should be addressed with quick customer-service fixes or short-term promotional activities – but a home video or a 140-character text message is probably not going to deliver the rich insights that fuel meaningful innovation or make the case for strategic business shifts. So balance the attention placed on top-of-mind and offthe- cuff comments with the understanding of deeper, more nuanced issues.

Also beware the “E! effect” – that is, the tendency for the sensational and the scandalous to get the most play (named after the TV show which thrives on sensation and scandal.) Whether its videos on YouTube or tweets on Twitter, the topics that are discussed and shared the most have high news value but may have low real consumer value. Analyze who is saying what and look for corroborating information from other sources to differentiate between a flash in the pan and points with substantive impact on the brand:customer relationship.

Finally, social media can sometimes act like a large suggestion box. It yields very positive comments and very negative ones, but rarely do you from people whose opinions lie in the middle. Non-response bias can mislead those who use social media to monitor current brand performance or brand context, so it shouldn't be used for those purposes. The input from the self-selected audiences of social media should be verified with a more representative sample.

3. Use social media to complement traditional market research

Social media is a useful supplement to traditional research methodologies, but not a replacement for them. Social media can be used to put issues on the company's radar screen and point to areas for further digging – or it can be used to gather quotes or stories that flesh out findings from survey research. You may also use it to recruit participants for research studies as long as the respondents are screened carefully. But social media should not be used in the absence of more reliable, representative research methodologies.

Some companies that previously shied away from traditional research now embrace social media listening as a cheaper, easier method for collecting consumer insights. While the maxim “some information is better than none” may seem to apply, these companies actually end up only “knowing enough to be dangerous.” Social media may give them a misplaced sense of confidence in the limited and biased information it contains. Innovation always yields promising new uses and applications – social media is no different. Pioneering brands have adopted social media as a vehicle for advertising, promotions, customer service, corporate relations, and more. Gathering consumer input is a natural extension of these uses and social media is a powerful way to forge stronger bonds between company and consumer.

But as with all innovation, social media users would do well to respect its boundaries. Before jumping on the social media bandwagon, check out the road it's traveling – and proceed with caution.

¹Nielsen Online, 03.18.09, http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/tweets-tweetsof-success/

²Advertising Age, 3.30.09, http://adage.com/digital/article?article_id=135605

Denise Lee Yohn is an independent brand as businessTM consulting partner who has worked with clients like Sony, Nautica, and Frito-Lay to operationalize their brands to grow their businesses. Read more by Denise at <http://deniseleeyohn.com/bites/best-bites>.