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Marketing developments

Social media's emerging importance in market research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the study is to investigate the use of social media as a new investigative tool in marketing research.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper's approach is an analysis of the existing social marketing literature and industry practice in marketing analysis.

Findings – The market research profession has been affected by developments in social media. First, some of the traditional research methods suffer from changes in consumer communication patterns. As social media supplant communication methods such as telephony and even email, researchers have diminished capacity to reach consumer subjects. As a result, the social media have spawned a number of research techniques that overcome the problems that have started to affect the old techniques.

Research limitations/implications – The article reviews the state of market research and its efforts to remain effective. The major new social media based market research techniques are described as well as their strengths and weaknesses. One limitation of the study is the focus on published research techniques. The study does not address proprietary techniques that may be used in practice.

Practical implications – Social media have reduced the effectiveness of traditional market research techniques. Marketers can overcome that effect by employing some of the social media related techniques that have become available.

Originality/value – To date, few, if any, academic studies have been done that assess the impact of social media on the use of market research techniques. The study draws conclusions that may aid practitioners in maintaining successful marketing research techniques.

Keywords Market research, Social media, Law, Techniques

Paper type Literature review

Arguably one of the most important sources of information about the state of market research is the Market Research Association. Its website clarifies its role as a professional association. It provides a training element that is geared to keeping the standards of excellence in the opinion and market research industry. The training is geared to the professional basis of market research and related business skills. Like most trade associations, it lobbies government on behalf of the industry. One of its valuable services is measuring the pulse of the industry and evaluating current standards and practices. One of the authors is an active member of the association and serves on one of its governing boards. The members of the Market Research Association (MRA) are quite familiar with the challenges and opportunities the profession faces.

The MRA communicates with its members and the profession through its in-house practitioner journal, *Alert!*. In assessing the state of the art and developments in the

industry, the authors evaluated the content of issues spanning the last twelve months. During that time *Alert!* covered a number of themes including developments in market research techniques and practice, specific industry developments, strategic uses of research, changes in consumer markets, and the rise of social media. Social media-related articles outnumbered any other subject area.

Background

Consumers have embraced the internet and its social and community elements to a degree unimaginable just ten years ago. Like other areas within marketing, the market research industry has been greatly affected by developments in social media and social communication. Social media and the ability of consumers to consult each other instantly has reversed the traditional brand manager/consumer power relationship (Christodoulides and Jevons, 2011; Christodoulides, 2009). In the past, brand managers would create clear and motivating messages, buy and place them in media and hope that consumers would respond with preference for the brand, or better yet, sales. Social media have changed marketing by shifting the scalability of influence, and the ways in which consumers share, evaluate and choose information (Smithee, 2011). With the advent of computer networks and

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entertainment programs, traditional media, including television, have lost viewer- or readership and the power of advertising has been reduced. Moreover, the rapidity of online communication and multiple information sources makes advertising and marketer sourced promotion, much less relevant.

Social media and the social customer

Social media have affected more than promotion. With traditional media less important as communication vehicles, other areas in marketing have had to shift their focus. As early as the 1990s, quantitative research suffered with the closing of many call centers. Researchers adapted with the creation of online surveys. Today, a similar shift is occurring. Qualitative research is now translating to the online environment. The industry has recognized the importance of social networking and user-generated content. They are well established and are virtually an open portal to detailed consumer information that was not accessible in the past (Sawchuk, 2011). The industry has now embraced the technological innovations that make qualitative research more effective.

Social media's effects are so far reaching that they represent a revolution in communication. Earlier, consumers almost abandoned the traditional written mail in favor of e-mail to interact with their family and friends. In addition, they have reduced their use of traditional media like the telephone and have adopted social media. Data from the Pew Internet and American Life project polled over 2,250 Americans and found that the most common reason for using social media was "[s]taying in touch with current friends" (Finn, 2011). This supports the idea that Facebook is arguably more used than email and is better for social connections. It has thus changed the dynamics of communication. Traditional personal communication is one-to-one. Social media allows one-to-many communication. This has far-reaching implications for market researchers.

Researchers have continuously sought consumer information and articulated their quest as seeking the voice of the customer. What the customer says is important since it can lead to a higher degree of product success – if the voice is heard clearly. Significantly, listening to the customer is relatively expensive (Sawchuk, 2011). One not only has to listen, one has to find the customers first. However, recent social media developments make listening a bit easier. First of all, customers can be found where they congregate, on websites like Facebook, Twitter and online communities. There they can share their ideas with each other, or with companies that make the product and service offerings of interest to them. Such users have a need to be heard and will discuss their preferences and problems openly. They seem to like flexing their newfound communications muscle. Today, representative consumers spend more time online than the consumers of a few years ago. In addition, these consumers have a wider social network, which is logical because the internet can connect strangers who can then develop their own relationships. Flexing that communication muscle, consumers now want to be partners in marketing rather than be marketed at. This presents new opportunities for engagement and research.

Why are social media so important?

Woodall and Colby (2011) analyzed the appeal of social media over traditional media and characterized four important elements. They are:

- 1 *Satisfying an impulse.* Consumers can connect when they feel like connecting or not connect when they wish to remain unconnected. Connections are quick and take little effort.
- 2 *The excitement of sharing.* They use social media to share their experiences with others. Many have individual interests that may not be shared in their neighborhoods. The internet expands the reach of communication to include others.
- 3 *Seeking advice.* Users exploit social media to get information from others. Trust is inherent in the process. Social media users are often perceived as unbiased and can be viewed as experts. Their advice is seen as more trustworthy than comments from salespeople who are perceived to have a commercial intent. This aspect has far reaching consequences for marketers and can be a bonanza of information for researchers.
- 4 *Sharing with others with similar interests.* Online consumer communities have been described as individuals who come together to discuss topics of interest. The subject matter can be related to business, family, avocations, politics, technology or other areas. Typically, there is a concentration of expertise that benefits community members and the interactivity of the internet can help the community's knowledge grow (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). The information value of online communities can be enormous.

Social media, including online communities, present a potentially valuable alternative to standard research methods that suffer from declining response rates. Attempts to hear the voice of the customer in their social media use benefit from an open and honest foundation. Consumers are willing to ask questions of importance to them and expect comments from people who share the same interests or problems. The information flow is open to community members and represents a conversation members can follow.

The use of research techniques has changed as technology changed. As mentioned earlier, social media is being used throughout the marketing research community in many different ways. While companies understand the need for a social media presence in their marketing plans, few companies are making inroads using social media for the research needs of their company. Since the goal of marketing research is to attempt to understand how potential customers perceive the brand/product/service and to delve deeper into obtaining a better grasp of who are customers are, social media makes an ideal vehicle for such research (Schlack, 2010). Social media vehicles can be used for various marketing research tasks such as focus groups, consumer panels, depth interviewing, etc. While the most popular route is to send an email survey to current customers, social media enables companies to engage in a more sophisticated and enlightening technique. No longer are researchers forced to make phone calls to increase subjects or to arrange research locations. For example, researchers can benefit from the vast number of potential subjects engaged in social media as well as providing subjects

with a more comfortable environment to complete surveys or engage in a focus group (Pettit, 2011).

Marketing researchers are using social media in several ways, including:

- 1 *Pattern recognition.* Public opinion is measured by aggregating searches and mentions on-line. By developing a system such as Mass Opinion Business Intelligence, companies can gauge their “share of opinion” as well as the valence of the mention (Toplansky, 2010).
- 2 *Consumer panels.* Members of the panel are contacted and assigned an internet chat room wherein questions about products or services are asked. Panel members engage in an ongoing dialogue in which they express their views. New questions and product ideas can be included in the discussion without any issues. With consumer panels, the researcher can control the dialogue by dictating questions. In addition, with the abundance of webcams installed on computers, companies can engage in on-line synchronous chat with panel members using Skype or another conference software. As with all panels, obtaining the “right” subjects is difficult and using an online vehicle presents even more hurdles. According to Leah Howse (2011), when recruiting subjects, companies should be direct, be transparent, provide appropriate incentives, and utilize the power of the opinion leaders (blog writers).
- 3 *Social networks.* Unlike consumer panels whereby the researcher has control, social networks are “live” reducing the control the researcher has in other vehicles. Such places are open communities where consumers can express their opinions. Sites like Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter create the ability to broadcast ideas with limited opportunity for the dynamic live chat as found in panels and communities. Another aspect of social networks is the ability to create a brand/fan page. These sites enable the researcher to do exploratory research with their brand, product, or service. Twitter can be used in research as an on-line listening tool and for crowd sourcing (Burton and Soboleva, 2011; Crawford, 2009; Ehrlich and Shami, 2010). Facebook also offers opportunity to target surveys to subjects that meet the correct criteria. Ironically, the social networks can be used to populate the traditional research vehicles like focus groups, depth interviewing, and survey completion. In addition to consumer research, social networks such as LinkedIn provide opportunities for business-to-business research as well as serving as a great way to fill business-to-business Marketing Research Online Communities (MROC) and business-to-business panels with potential contributors.
- 4 *Market research online communities (MROC).* Similar to panels, MROCs are closed communities that recruit members for a particular study and interest. Members are invited to discuss topics based on their interest and for the purpose of meeting others with similar interests. While consumer panels are recruited for each session, MROC members are engaged throughout a longer research process. But like consumer panels, MROCs can employ on-line synchronous chat with members of the community. Additionally, MROCs are not limited to discussion groups but can include bulletin boards, blogs, idea banks, etc. For example, the entertainment community, in particular Fox Television, has embraced these MROCs to gain immediate information regarding

their television programs. Fox believes the MROC members are more willing to discuss the programming naturally without much prodding (Benoit, 2010).

- 5 *Listening platforms.* Different from many of the other social media groups, listening platforms are bulletin boards, blogs, review sites, etc. They are just mentions of the brands or service. For market researchers, it is the total mentions. The web has an abundance of information at a researcher's key stroke and these platforms are the best first step in learning about your brand or service. These platforms are also a rich source of data mining for understanding potential trends and thoughts.
- 6 *Geo-tagging.* Geo-tagging services like Foursquare and SlideShare provide research opportunities for not only business to consumer operations but also business to business operations. Foursquare enables users to check in when they are in an area or at a location. Such measurements provide helpful quantitative evidence for companies and consumers. Similar operations are used by businesses to record visits to booths at tradeshow. Another example is SlideShare whereby businesses share ideas providing research opportunities.

A great advantage of these techniques is the ability to uncover information quickly and without great costs. Social media shift the research technique from asking to listening – from an active listening to a passive listening approach (Brandwaithe and Patterson, 2011; Pettit, 2011). A problem many have with social media and research is the belief that it will take over traditional methods. Such belief is unfounded because traditional methods are still needed, for example, to better understand customers, investigate the competition, and measure awareness (Pettit, 2011).

There are, however, some drawbacks to the use of social media for such endeavors. First, the use of social networks and other devices are hampered by their inability to source who is writing. With panels, subjects with known demographics are recruited, but social networks and listening platforms have limited ability to track demographics of the respondents. Without demographics, researchers have limited ability to extrapolate who is saying what and where. A second problem is that researchers are unable to see if the same people are posting on multiple sites. While one may see quantity, it may be the result of continued posting by one fan. Such a situation leads into a third problem that of data quality and external validity. If the same people are writing numerous postings, the data become suspect, not valid and, thus, not generalizable. Fourth, with the inability to question those who post, the message being written by the writer is subject to interpretation by the coders. With misspellings and vernacular, coders can misidentify messages and possibly lead to an inaccurate interpretation of the wording. The technique of attempting to understand the emotion associated with a posting is called sentiment analysis. Thus, the data collected via social media can be construed as primarily qualitative since interpretation is needed to review writings on bulletin boards or Facebook or twitter.

Yet another major concern regarding social media was expressed by the American Association of Public Opinion Research (2010). Within the social media circles, members tend to be “over-surveyed” resulting in a conditioning of respondents. These respondents become aware of questioning

and thus do not provide a solid source and a major problem with response bias. Further exacerbating the situation is the lack of representativeness in the sample with subjects belonging to multiple panels leaving the “silent” members not heard. The less experienced subjects may feel inhibited in expressing their opinion with more experienced people in the group and may not be able to quickly navigate the forum. Overall, the AAPOC question the response bias, attrition and conditioning.

A major point of interest is to consider your target audience. Not all target markets embrace social media the same way. The methods of using social media for research need to differ according to whom you need to research. Millennials embrace all aspects of social media and are more likely to be highly engaged while baby boomers may be less engaged in general. As you narrow down your target, the more you need to make sure you are obtaining the necessary information you need for your project.

An interesting issue addressing social media is the inability to analyze body language and facial expressions. While webcams have attempted to solve the problem, this avenue still lacks the depth of a face-to-face encounter. Body language and facial expressions to many researchers are tools to better understand customers and their latent beliefs.

A major issue that is just beginning is the ethical aspect of using social media gathering the data and research (Pettit, 2011). Companies are sometimes not transparent with what data they are collecting and how they are collecting it. The problem stems from the technology moving quicker than the marketing research industry with researchers just beginning to realize the power of the social media tools. The covert nature of social media access may lead to suspicions about researchers. Are companies collecting data secretly? How are they using social media research in collecting data among children?

Legal/ethical concerns

Social media market research may touch areas in which there are legal or ethical concerns. An issue with regards to web surveys revolves around the confidentiality of the responses to these survey instruments. In particular, health and medical survey researchers need to be aware of government regulations that ensure health information privacy. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act was enacted to protect patients. As a result, web survey writers need to be sure information collected cannot be traced to the subject (Dominelli, 2003). Further concern is ensuring the data collected for the research are not used for any other purpose but research and that all respondents are given accurate information as to why the data is being collected.

In August 2011, the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO) released a set of guidelines for conducting research using social media. In addition to issues of privacy and confidentiality, CASRO addresses several other concerns. CASRO's ethical guidelines include:

- a discussion on informed consent so subjects are aware of research activities when they visit chat rooms and social networking sites;
- the conclusion that researchers should be transparent and avoid “cloaking” their internet addresses; and
- requiring data to be stored in a manner that protects subject confidentiality (CASRO, 2011).

Of critical importance to CASRO, as with many interest groups, is social media research conducted on children. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), ensures that personally identifiable information cannot be obtained from children under the age of thirteen (Thomas and Newman, 2009). In addition to COPPA, individual states have enacted regulation that further protects children's data from being obtained.

While groups exist to protect privacy and standards have been created for self-regulation, no laws are currently adopted to correct research violators. Sites and the industry are self-governed, and they self-regulate themselves with terms of service (ToS) and Privacy Policies. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) can evaluate the activities of firms and deem them “unfair” or “deceptive” if the FTC believes the website or company jeopardized the privacy of subjects.

Another ethical implication regarding social media and marketing research concerns contacting subjects. One act, the CAN-SPAM act, contains specific details on contacting potential subjects by way of emails in order to complete surveys (Thomas and Newman, 2009). Marketing research firms need to ensure they embark on a non-harassing method of securing subjects.

Overall, the technology is moving quicker than the government can respond. The US and European countries are attempting to establish guidelines and laws to protect privacy. These governments are cautious because of the newness of the field and the lightning quick changes occurring.

Implications for marketers

Social media have transformed the way in which society communicates and has changed societal perceptions and norms. Consumers' abilities to contact each other have prompted actions like “flash-mob” events or even political demonstrations during the “Arab Spring” movement that have toppled governments.

Social media's effects are clear. What is not so straightforward are the techniques and approaches to use them for marketing research. While a variety of research techniques, listed above, have been developed, each should be used with knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, they complement traditional research techniques.

Finally, the nature of social media, a public discourse that can be viewed covertly, requires researchers to be careful about how they use and evaluate the voice of the customer heard in these sources. Issues of information validity require careful assessment of whether many consumers voice a particular issue or just a few vocal contributors.

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