

The Hidden Truth: Information Accuracy in Social Networking Sites
Marketing 382: Customer Insights
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With the profuse amount of social networking sites that saturate the Internet, Web users have a plethora of options to choose from to express themselves (if they choose to do so). Facebook, Twitter, Ning, MySpace, Flickr, LinkedIn, Blogger and WordPress are just a few of the many social media sites that members share their information on with others. Consequently, the sharing of personal information has led to an increase in public knowledge for Web users, not only for other social media users and our friends, but for marketers as well.

The question about the type of information that individuals share online leads to a more prominent question about accuracy and performance: how do social media users portray themselves online? Do people perform or undermine who they are and how does this effect truth? More importantly, if it is difficult enough for marketers to determine the ‘real’ person behind a Facebook page or a Tweet, what is the value of online market research and customer insights?

The easy accessibility that the Internet provides allows freedom for customers to express their thoughts and opinions about anything and everything. However, the value of information research online for marketers is contemplated when they cannot tell what is true and what is false (in relation to behavioral and attitudinal information). Thus while information is freely communicated throughout the Web, marketers must be cautious about the information they pull from customer insights and should appropriate a more scrupulous and traditional approach in gathering information online.

Conversations & Fabrications

Conversations provide several windows in which marketers can peer into to observe what customers are talking about, how they are talking about them, and with whom. According to Baye et al. (2002), the Internet transformed the way in which products and services were sold between customers and businesses. The Internet thus acts as a window into not only what customers are saying online (whether it is positive or negative), but also insight into how goods can be improved and better catered to within a particular niche market.

The Internet allows for not only one-to-many communication, but many-to-many communication as well. According to Gideon Rose at the 2011 Foreign Affairs Live conference, the Internet has three primary effects on the media landscape, the first being its widespread availability of information at a low cost, thus easy to access to a vast majority of it. Secondly, the Internet provides access to amateurs in the public sphere, where the average citizen can voice their opinion at any time. Lastly, the Internet permits group coordination and synchronization of activities, where like-minded individuals can unite under a specific cause (Shirky et al., 2011).

According to Anne-Marie Slaughter, who also appeared at the 2011 Foreign Affairs Live conference, individuals over-estimate the value of their access to information and the value of access to each other; people synchronize their opinions, coordinate their activities, and document their results. Slaughter argues that social networking sites are being used to fabricate a society and augment the public sphere (Shirky et al., 2011). The idea of fabrication deserves special attention not only with regards to how individuals fabricate themselves but also their online public sphere.

Tribes, Leadership & Listenomics

According to Seth Godin, author of *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us*, the Internet is a vehicle that enhances and facilitates communication between social media users. Online tribes are thus an integral part of spawning an explosion of social media that encourages individuals to communicate and spread the word to other tribes. Social media attempts to bolster the relationships within tribes as ideas are shared and decisions are made quickly among individuals.

Godin argues that tribes have become the most effective media channel to date as they are longer-lasting and more effective. This is the key reason why Godin argues that leaders must join a tribe, since it is proving to be one of the most powerful and successful marketing investments. Buzz and viral marketing is also reinforced through the existence of tribes as it identifies leaders within their communities who spread the word about a new product or service. Marketers must listen and cater to customers because they are the true leaders of brands and companies today.

The mob mentality factor of tribes plays a large role in influencing others, considering 90% of people trust their friends over advertisers and marketers (Nielson Wire, 2009). This surprisingly high statistic should motivate marketers and advertisers to locate the leaders within social network communities, listen and learn from them. Bob Garfield, author of *The Chaos Scenario*, introduces the concept of “listenomics,” where the marketers no longer have the power to target, lecture, invade and dictate customers, but listen, connect and cultivate customer insights instead (Garfield, 2009).

Similarly, Charlene Li and Bernoff of *The Groundswell* argue that marketers need to listen. Marketers need to be reading reviews and ratings of customers on products,

services and brands they are consuming and understanding what people are saying about them. Such reviews offer a valuable skill set for receiving feedback and provide an opportunity to companies to improve their relationships with their customers (and thus ameliorating their business).

All of these factors (conversations, tribes, leaders, listenomics and the groundswell) allow marketers to pay close attention to the conversations that occur on the Web. The greatest difficulty, however, is sifting through this information overload and determining not only who is telling the truth about themselves, but what and how they are putting themselves on display within social networks. While it is crucial, as Garfield argues, to listen, create and cultivate ideas based on customer insights and feedback, such information may not be relevant for potential market research.

Marketers must be weary of using information from tribes or groups within social networks because of the ambiguity of truth in information. This may be due to the concept that leaders (which also influence tribes), may have ulterior motives and not only create a persona that exaggerates their characteristics or undermines their personality, but this fabrication can also lead to deception amongst the tribe that is following him/her. As marketers look for leaders within groups to appropriate brand, product or service advocacy, such false information can lead to a collapse of relevant research.

Crowd-sourcing & Information Sharing

Searching for information online is faintly different from research offline. For one, information is found quickly and easily with a few keyword searches in a search engine and millions of links show up for one search (although the accuracy at which

information is retrieved is debatable). Secondly, in relation to the aforementioned idea of fabrication, anyone is free to mash, remix, modify, add or delete user-generated content without a gatekeeper, such as with YouTube videos and music. Thirdly, because there is no information filter, anyone can share just about anything about themselves, whether it is true or false. For marketers, this means it is a more difficult job to determine what is valuable information found on the Internet and what is not.

In *New Study Reveals Surprises in How People Share*, author Jason Falls writes how individuals participating in social networking sites do not even realize they are sharing their personal information with more people than they think; others are not comfortable enough to do so (Falls, 2009). The vast amount of information that is shared on the Internet can be fairly anonymous and unfiltered, causing a free flow of data clutter of just about anything. Marketers thus have a tougher time sifting through and organizing the conversation clutter and evaluating the material for appropriate market research.

Social media encourages crowd-sourcing ventures for customers to provide feedback and opinions about their product or service. Due to this open-source aspect of social media, Dion Hinchcliffe (2009) elaborates how product, service and brand quality are enhanced through the support of their customers. Not only do marketers now have to evaluate the content of reviews and ratings and determine as to whether or not these are real people speaking about a product, brand or service (or if they are paid marketers), but also if they person is speaking truthfully and illustrating true behavioral characteristics (as opposed to being influenced by outsiders or conforming to peer pressure).

Connecting with Strangers (and Marketers)

Helen Raptoplous's *Social Media Offers Profound Opportunities for Great Relationships* article illustrates, "By sitting in your home or office and logging online you can meet people from all walks of life from all over the planet." Thus, the ease in which we search for other individuals to build a particular bond is immense and to a certain extent, unlimited, which mean marketers now have the ability to create deeper levels of connections with their target audience. These levels of connections allow Internet users to determine the amount of information they want to share with others.

Individuals are befriending strangers and connecting with them through a medium that allows one another to develop deeper levels of connection, and it is up to us to determine the type of relationship we want to have (just as we can offline). But do Internet users fully understand the concept of a public domain? If we look at the Teen market, for example, too much information is being shared, without them really realizing that the way in which they expose their lives to marketers (are less concerned with exposing themselves through pictures, videos and comments), suggests that the younger generation is becoming increasingly comfortable with strangers.

The ease with which individuals are connecting with strangers (as well as marketers) online insinuates that marketers may have a better chance of becoming friends with strangers online and becoming more acquainted with their niche markets, but also the caution that marketers must take in order to foster relationships with their customers, such as respecting individual privacy and confidentiality. Yet the issue of self-representation and anonymity online also challenges marketers to befriend customers, since they may not be representing themselves truthfully to the public either.

Anonymity and the Representation of Self

The idea of connecting to strangers makes room for another concept to evolve: anonymity. The representation of the self is a salient feature within social networks that allow individuals the agency to choose who they are (or who they want to be). As Goffman (1959) contends, actors will idealize their self-presentation by either concealing or exaggerating certain aspects that relate to relative values of a given situation (Vasalou et al, 2008). Similarly on the Internet, Ellison et al (2006) argues that online daters tend to idealize their selves through personal cues (Vasalou et al, 2008). Bargh et al. (2002) further discovered that online users enjoy the anonymity/ambiguity aspect on the Internet.

The issue of anonymity and ambiguity online is an interesting feature within social networks. This aspect permits individuals to invent various social notions, depending on their willingness (or not) to share information with others. For example, one individual may desire to portray a certain character online but do not represent this type of self in reality, thus they either emphasize certain characteristics or create a completely different person. On the contrary, another person may feel skeptical or apprehensive about the Internet and may not provide as much information about themselves, or they may also decide to lie about who they are if they feel insecure towards strangers or online lurkers.

The amount of information that people share thus depends on their comfort level with exposing themselves to others, thus people can control their privacy by choosing what information to share. However, the idea of sharing personal information can relate to other issues in “performance” or essentially, acting (or not) in social networks. Some people do not share all of their personal information online while others exaggerate or lie

about it, thus decreasing chances of utilizing relevant information in a study.

Consequently, it is increasingly difficult for marketers to determine what is true and what is false about their target audience they are attempting to cater to. If marketers cannot determine what is true and what is false information, then what is the value of research online for marketers?

Online Market Research

Customer insights found online have varying degrees of truth and falsity to them, which suggests to marketers that they must be very careful in determining the appropriate information to use in their research. As Bernie Hogan observes in *Analyzing Social Networks via the Internet*, there are several analytical frameworks to apply when collecting data on personal web pages in social networks (Hogan, 2007). Hogan elaborates on e-mail data collection from the server-side that allows information to be captured from a group domain (such as a university). On the client-side, information is monitored through software that searches within specific databases. Scrapers and spiders are also used to automate script on personal web pages on blogs or social network sites.

In *Netnography*, Robert Kozinets uses an online content analysis approach in which ethnographic procedures (both quantitative and qualitative) are used to evaluate individuals' emotions. A qualitative approach categorizes words and expressions based on their positive and negative connotations, whereas a quantitative approach counts the number of positive and negative words expressed within an online discussion forum (Kozinets, 2010). However, although this research technology is available, it still does

not have the capacity to determine the true identity of an individual and what they represent by merely evaluating their dialogue through words and expressions.

There is an increasing need for accuracy and accountability within social media networks. Charles Kadushin, (who is more concerned with ethics and privacy issues in market research), writes, “network data collection is harmful regardless of any possible benefits” (Kadushin, 2005). Although he argues for a pessimistic view of online data collection and research, he offers some valid points that online research can often reap negative results, including inaccuracy, hearsay and biases found in surveillance reports.

An example to support Kadushin’s hypothesis is that other individuals will tend to out-perform themselves by either sharing too much information or expressing elements of their lives that somewhat far from the truth (which ultimately leads to data error and thus presents a lack of validity in the research). Such inaccurate collection of data will be “fatal to an “innocent” person” (Kadushin, 2005). Not only does this information misrepresent the participant, but it also muddles information used in market research.

More interestingly, Google recently (February, 2011) launched a program called Panda/Farmer Update in which an algorithm will evaluate pages of Internet users engaged in social networks and assess whether or not the person knows what they are talking about in relation to a particular topic. Google’s software thus looks at content and determines whether it has value or not. Although this is the closest software and social media research tool that attempts to uncover truth behind customer insights and conversations in content farms, it does not determine actual characteristics and personas.

Although there are several different types of technology that allow for the collection of online data, there the closest measure to proving what individuals say online

is legitimate is Google's Farmer/Panda Update. However, this type of software is still not at the level of peering behind the words of what customers are saying and thus is unable to really understand and know customers for who they are in reality (as opposed to who they portray themselves to be in a virtual world).

Next Steps for Marketers

Although there are the advantages of customer insights online, it is more difficult to determine the truth behind conversations. The gathering and identification of customer insights and the design of valuable customer experiences is more difficult to achieve due to performance and anonymity. While marketers can better cater to certain niche audiences with targeted products and services through the social medium that they use (and thus reach people wherever they are and however they are getting there), whether this information is valuable or not remains the ultimate philosophical question of customer insights on the Internet.

While Internet research provides great information diversity and can be accessed at a convenience, information is also very disorganized, transient and no process to check for information accuracy (McNeese, 2008). However, traditional research offline requires more organization, assistance, and quality of information is greater, although more time is required to perform such research (McNeese, 2008). Moreover, as Grundy et al. note, face-to-face communication in participant-transcriptionist approaches "can create quality transcripts that represent the participant's voice" (Grundy et al., 2003). Such traditional, offline research methods provide a more accurate approach to market research.

Additionally, in-depth interviews and focus groups provide a stronger research database for marketers. These techniques allow for more engagement and intimate communication between the researcher and the participant. Furthermore, as contends, “they provide much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys. They also may provide a more relaxed atmosphere in which to collection information...” as people may feel more comfortable conversing face-to-face instead of filling out a survey (Boyce, 2006).

David Owen of *Online Market Research is Good for You* contends that using a hybrid of traditional and non-traditional methods of market research is the most effective way to reach a reliable information database. Owen observes that using such a method requires, “zero travel expense, demographically-diffuse samples, and significant time and cost reductions” (Owen, 2006). He specifically argues for a hybrid of online market research followed by a telephone interview in order to leverage valid information research and communication between researcher and participant.

Ultimately, marketers must resort to traditional methods of data collection online. Although marketers may still collect data within social networking sites about attitudes and behaviors of online users, the information they collect should be taken at face-value and followed up with more in-depth research and questioning about their particular insights. Marketers must be inquisitive about information being shared online, as not all of it will be true nor false, or even enough to evaluate properly for customer research. Such traditional ways of data collection (in-depth interviews, focus groups, etc.) followed after an online content analysis will help to provide a stronger and more reliable database of customer insights.

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