

Two Sides of Consumer-Generated Media:

Listening and Participating

Companies can't watch the action from the sidelines; they need to get in the game for themselves.

Social media is providing marketers with an array of tools and opportunities that offer an unusual entrée into understanding the good, bad and ugly of how customers use and perceive brands, your company and even your employees. In today's world, it is increasingly critical to understand your specific

customer needs and to build business relationships both on a local and global basis.

Those strategies become more challenging, however, as the landscape grows more complex. New media strategies present a means of closing the communication gap brought on by time and distance. Valuable global relations are being created through tools that range from text mes-

sages, microblogs, podcasts, vlogs (video blogs), social networking communities and traditional blogs. By leveraging these new technologies, people exchange ideas and information, and discover common experiences that transcend cultural differences. Listening and participating in ongoing conversations enables organizations to develop a stronger emotional engage-



ment with customers, prospects and other stakeholders.

LISTENING

These “virtual back fence” conversations, commonly called consumer-generated media or content (CGM/CGC), are found in the comments of blogs, bulletin boards, social networking communities and product reviews. The unfiltered, raw voices of peer-to-peer discussions are frequently rich in passion and emotion, thereby offering a window into a world that previously eluded traditional marketing research methodologies.

Since these virtual chats are Internet-based, they can be tracked, measured and analyzed. Consumer-generated

media, therefore, becomes one more source of information that should be scrutinized to mitigate the risk in making business decisions.

Although monitoring social media is gaining acceptance as a complementary piece of marketing research strategy, marketers should keep in mind that there is a difference between data mined from CGM and the information derived from formal surveys or focus groups. Control of the sample is one varying element. CGM seems to have more in common with ethnography than it does with a quantitative study. The information mined from consumer-generated media ranges from product review sites – where customers candidly offer their opinions and often vote on the best product within a category – to positive and negative customer service experiences and trends. A significant benefit of keeping a watchful eye on new media conversations is the ability to tap in to information in real time. The opportunity for rapid response in a crisis situation can be a powerful outcome of consistent listening.

Trend analysis is gaining acceptance as a valuable tool for understanding CGM and dealing with “extreme” content contributed by specific individuals. At least one major automobile manufacturer, for example, began mining data at a high level to measure consumer attitudes toward specific models. This led to a more granular analysis of features and attributes, which then was used to provide insights for product design and development.

Although the customer purchase decision is complex, and social media is but one influencing factor, information gleaned from listening to digital conversations can

have an impact on how an organization conducts business and, in turn, can set internal cultural changes in motion:

- From a C-suite perspective, the challenge becomes how to integrate this new type of information to support customer-focused business decisions.
- From an operational perspective, the challenge becomes how to develop internal processes that will quickly pass the right information to the people with authority to take action.
- From a marketing perspective, the challenge becomes how to leverage the information to develop a better customer experience that supports the brand identity.
- From an R&D perspective, the challenge becomes how to use this type of customer insight to create new products and services that tie back to the brand.

PARTICIPATING

Consumer-generated media is Web-based and can easily and quickly be passed along to friends and relatives. However, it is not unusual for a comment from a blog post or discussion points in a social media networking community to find their way from the blogosphere to mainstream media. The Internet has made speed and expositional networking the new customer capital. Through sites such as LinkedIn or Facebook, networking has expanded to include friends of friends of friends. Conversations can spread around the world in seconds, influencing sales and the hard-won good will of the brand.

What may appear at first glance to be an innocuous customer service complaint may find its way to a front page story in the *New*

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white paper

York Times or *Wall Street Journal* once it spreads around the Internet and becomes an online cause célèbre. In fact, it's not uncommon anymore for a reporter to base a story on a blog post. Frequently, the article appears both in the hard copy and online editions of the media outlet, thus extending the firestorm's reach and awareness still further. As more people copy and paste the media link into emails, blogs and product reviews, the buzz continues to build.

Johnson & Johnson provides an interesting example of corporate participation in the new media conversation. In the summer of 2007, J&J leveraged its blog, JNJ BTW, to address a crisis situation that was rapidly escalating in both mainstream media and among bloggers. The company sued the American Red Cross for what it considered to be inappropriate and illegal use of the "Red Cross trademark," as explained in this public statement:

"After more than a century of strong cooperation in the use of the Red Cross trademark, with both organizations respecting the legal boundaries for each others' unique legal rights, we were very disappointed to find that the American Red Cross [ARC] started a campaign to license the trademark to several businesses for commercial purposes on all types of products being sold in many different retail and other commercial outlets. These products include baby mitts, nail clippers, combs, toothbrushes and humidifiers. This action is in direct violation of a Federal statute protecting the mark as well as in violation of our longstanding trademark rights.

For the past several months, Johnson & Johnson has attempted to resolve this issue through cooperation and discussion with the ARC, and recently offered mediation, to no avail. The Company was left with no choice but to seek protection of our trademark rights through the courts."

Although Johnson & Johnson did use traditional public relations tactics to air its side of the story, Vice President Ray Jordan elaborated further on the J&J corporate blog in a post entitled, "You're Doing

What?!" In keeping with the writing style of social media, he explained the company's point of view in a personal voice using casual language. His efforts produced a significant number of positive posts from other bloggers, which in turn provided support for Johnson & Johnson's position. Although negative comments were allowed on the J&J corporate blog, they actually served to reinforce the perception that the company was open and transparent about the situation, thus garnering even more respect for the organization. The blog achieved what no other crisis communication strategy could: It allowed Johnson & Johnson to tell its story the way it wanted to, in its own voice, without mainstream media clouding the message with its own interpretations.

A corporate social media strategy can support various marketing functions and tactics and deliver benefits including the following:

- A forum for telling your stories your way
- Ability to determine when, where and how your stories are published
- Encouragement for online brand champions to tell your stories for you
- Enhanced relationships with customers, prospects and stakeholders
- A sense of community created around the brand
- More and better feedback from customers and stakeholders

For some organizations, this type of unstructured, conversational dialogue with the public might be an intriguing concept, but it is a risk they are unwilling to consider. Some fear that the application of a social media strategy results in the loss of control of their carefully crafted brand message.

The truth is that companies could never fully control the way customers talked about their products and services before either. Those conversations have always occurred in one-on-one chats or in small group discussions. Prior to the Internet, informal customer word-of-mouth might have been slower to impact the brand and more difficult to track, but it's certainly not a new concept. It's just taken on a new dimension in the online space.

It would be naïve not to acknowledge the inherent vulnerability that comes from allowing unfiltered conversations to take place in the public forum of a blog. Will the brand be compromised? Will negative comments impact sales? Will the blogger represent the company fairly? Can the people writing for a corporate blog hold honest discussions without compromising a competitive advantage?

As Johnson & Johnson learned, people are talking about your products, services and employees anyway – whether you're part of the dialogue or not. So the question becomes: Where would you prefer that those conversations be held – on a competitor's blog or on YouTube? Creating a corporate blog or a YouTube channel provides an opportunity to participate and listen in on the discussion on your own turf. By allowing constructive criticism on your company blog and responding to it head-on, you may discourage a negative post elsewhere.

In summary, a successful social media strategy is one that involves two elements: listening and participating. Step one is to develop a continuous, action-focused listening strategy that tracks your customers' conversations. Step two is to engage your customers with simple and genuine "people talk."

The bottom line is that people want to do business with people they know and like, and consumer-generated media strongly influences the way your brand is perceived and how purchase decisions are made. Whether through Facebook, YouTube, blogs or another new media entity, your company forfeits a critical competitive advantage if it is not an active participant in the conversation. ■