CORRALLING THE WILD, WILD WEST OF SOCIAL MEDIA INTELLIGENCE

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Introduction

The rise of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter has created new forms of communication that are dominating a larger percentage of people's interest and time. Overall, social media represents a significant new channel where individuals come to be entertained and communicate with others. This environment and these new channels can be rich in content but it's often difficult to extract meaning let alone generate insights. There is an opportunity for marketing professionals to leverage social media data and create meaningful connections with customers only if they're able to apply a framework for generating insights from all of this content.

Our goal for this paper is to share with you our framework for social media intelligence developed over our nearly 2-year journey listening to industry experts, evaluating social media tools and conducting pilots.

Why Social Media?

For marketing professionals, social media represents a new and relatively inexpensive channel that enables direct access to individuals and segments. Social media engagement does not require a degree or any particular expertise; literally anybody can do it and that's the scary part. Due to this low barrier to entry it's critical that marketing professionals have a better understanding of the best way of engaging customers and determining the impact of that engagement in these new virtual environments.

Social media offers a new source of supposedly unmediated, top of mind commentary on product experiences and perceptions. User generated content can be a rich window into human perceptions and behaviors. User generated content has the potential to become an additional source of information that can supplement traditional sources such as survey measurement. Active opinions previously hard to capture via traditional research are becoming increasingly available online. What may or may not be relevant information can potentially fill in gaps in information to provide a holistic picture for any business concern. Thus the ability to leverage this new data source has the potential to change marketing over time. If only we could corral the wild, Wild West.

Despite the increasing prominence of social media in the marketing discipline, the relationship between social media conversations and market behaviors remains largely unclear. What is clear it that the best method and the best analytic tools for acquiring insights from social media is yet to be determined despite an unprecedented number claims to the contrary from vendors currently in the marketplace. As the number of individuals incorporating social media into their communication efforts continues to increase the onus will be on the ability to understand how to use this new data source in decision-making, if at all. In the end, does knowing how many Facebook fans you have help you make a decision?

Social Media & Technology

The defining characteristic of social media is technology that gives an individual the ability to create and share content and the relative ease with which an individual can broadcast and connect to others online. It's this ability that truly enables Andy Warhol's vision of a world where anyone can be famous for 15 minutes. It's also this ability that makes social media channels high-potential vehicles for rapid and wide dissemination of customer perceptions and avenues where individuals can be influenced and seek to influence others. These vehicles go beyond newer mediums like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube extending to traditional blogs, forums and message boards.

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How big is social media relative to overall internet traffic?
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In terms of overall internet activity, a significant share is centered on social media both in the US and worldwide. Of the estimated 1.35 billion unique global internet users older than 15, **79%** engage in a social media activities. Social networks are rapidly becoming the center of social media activity with Facebook being the most prevalent. It's estimated that 50% of global internet users use Facebook on average 27 minutes a day.i

The penetration of social networks is even more dramatic among US internet users. **97%** of the 212 million US internet users over 15 are involved in some form of social networking. 72% are Facebook users and that continues to grow on a daily basis. Beyond Facebook, 62% of US internet users engage with blogsii including both professional blogging channels (e.g.,

Technorati) and blogging platforms (e.g., WordPress) that promote content creation. Modes of engaging in social media outside of the PC environment are also becoming increasingly important. By January 2010, 30 percent of smartphone users accessed social networking sites via their mobile browsers; an 8 percent increase from the previous yeariii. Location check-ins and finding local deals via applications like Foursquare or Groupon epitomizes the mobile social media experience.
These trends aren't just limited to the young. One of the fastest growing segment of social networking adopters are internet users older than 50.iv The adoption of social networking across a spectrum of ages underscores the potential voice of customer across a range of issues.

While technology has enabled the rapid creation and dissemination of social media content there is one big caveat – **not all social media content is publicly available**. Facebook is a great example where individual privacy settings limit the access to the majority of information to non-friends. We're left to guess the percentage of content generated behind the privacy wall which would be of interest and useful to marketing professionals. The good news is that the amount of publicly available content will continue to grow over time as the experience of creating, disseminating and consuming content in social media environments becomes the new normal.

The Journey to a Social Media Intelligence Framework

So how do we make sense out of it all? We began our journey towards a social media intelligence framework with a systematic assessment of social media intelligence best practices in late 2009. That assessment included an evaluation of 50 plus tools available in the market. Our assessment quickly found that a set of common social media analytic best practices had yet to emerge. In fact, the state of the social media analytics industry could be characterized as a wild west "free for all". There was no sheriff in town in the sense that social media governance didn't exist and that largely remains true today. Social media vendors continue to market a series of inflated claims about the methodologies and tools which on closer inspection didn't deliver on their promises.

A Framework for Insight Generation

Through investigation and a series reviews and pilots we developed the core tenets of our framework. The core tenets of Microsoft's framework for social media intelligence are that **systematic listening** and **reliable measurement** enable **insight generation.** Learning how to listen to the right conversations, especially when there is so much content available, is the first step on the path to insight generation.

What do I need to "Listen" to?

Listening begins with the ability to efficiently access content. The beauty of social media is its availability and timeliness. Always on and pulsing, the social media environment offers a dynamically updated window into what people are thinking and doing. The problem is that marketing professionals can't, nor should they, listen to it all. Successfully listening requires a **systematic approach** that gives marketing professionals the ability to identify relevant content, identify who is talking and synthesize what is being said into consumable insights.

Systematic listening is the activity of identifying and focusing on content or individuals pertinent to a business problem or marketing initiative. The ability to follow the conversations of certain individuals and monitor the reactions to those conversations in the social media sphere is critical. This ability also makes finding relevant social media content via traditional search engines difficult because the vast majority of customer opinions and comments often don't surface in a conventional search return.

Listening can be either **passive**– monitoring of banter in general – or **active** through focus listening on specific topics. Whether active or passive the focus of listening should be on getting a sense of **who is talking** and **what are the types of conversations** they are having rather than the volume or sentiment generated by the conversation. Listening also needs to be **broad;** incorporating multiple channels and multiple sources.
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Isn't Twitter enough?
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It's dangerous to concentrate on one channel to the exclusion of others because one channel rarely captures the full conversation and content on one channel frequently jumps and generates conversations on other channels. In addition, each channel has inherent biases due to the audience they attract so true understanding of the content of conversations can be different depending on where you listen. Measures of success can also change depending on the channel. A great example comes from a study we conducted that examined social media conversations about **Xbox 360 Kinect** game titles prior to launch. We found that conversations on Twitter were significantly more positive than other channels. In this instance listening

to Twitter alone would have given us a different understanding of the buzz around game titles. So when it comes to listening **one channel is never enough and the channel does matter.**

A common concern when listening broadly across multiple channels and sources is the potential of missing relevant content. Given the vast social media universe it's impossible to know if all the bases are covered. An added complication is that many tools sample social media conversations only capturing parts of the conversation for limited periods of time which can lead to a distorted view of customer perceptions for a given channel. Twitter is a prime example. Full fire hose access is not common as most data providers often limit Twitter access options (e.g. sprinkler & fire hose).

So how do you know if you're getting access to all publicly available content? You don't – but that's not necessarily a bad thing. A careful examination of data sources should always occur so that you're aware of any data limitations that might be present. You also need to be smart about how you look for relevant social media content. The goal of any listening activity should be to get a sense of what people are saying about a topic, product or service at any given moment in time. This is achieved through identifying specific themes in social media conversations that you're most interested in to address your business concerns.

Identifying themes of interest starts with how you construct your initial query. In a couple of early pilots which examined how much Microsoft was associated with "environmental efficiency" and how Microsoft executive activities impacted perceptions of Microsoft the initial **query design** was the primary determinant of the results we got. Theme identification allows marketing professionals to effectively search and organize social media content to enable analysis and ultimately insight generation.

From Listening to Measurement: Classification & Sentiment

Beyond systematic listening marketing professionals need to be able to make sense of social media content to help evaluate the impact of marketing or market trends. Making sense of it all requires analytical capabilities that are beyond basic listening capabilities. The only problem is that it's **difficult to place structure on inherently unstructured content**. Traditional qualitative methodologies can be appropriate techniques for structuring narrative content but these methods lack the scalability necessary to structure social media content.

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Can I Just Count Clicks?
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Historically web analytics have been the proxy for assessing performance and capturing trends in the broader social media environment. Unfortunately, *counting clicks and links* **has never been able to tell us if a message is landing or even how that message evolves across time and people.** Counting clicks in the social media context is equivalent to acquiring Twitter followers or Facebook fans and counting re-tweets and "likes". Marketing professionals have become increasingly fascinated with "counting clicks" however the web analytics approach still doesn't replace the need to understand what people are saying, e.g. how they feel and why people are reacting in a particular way. **Volume rarely tells the whole story**. It's the comments and opinions expressed in social media that provides a more profound understanding of the "Why?"

The best method for understanding the "Why?" is rigorous **classification** of social media content. Classification is the act of taking the raw opinions and perceptions present in social media data and classifying them into **meaningful categories.** Classification enables marketing professionals to understand what people are talking about. Classification is achieved through the use of text analysis tools which offer a consistent and rigorous method of analyzing the unstructured content found in social media. Advances in text analytics technology have made classification a more are viable option for social media intelligence. Whether a natural language text analytics approach is employed or another approach like machine learning understanding the value and limitations and of each type of approach is necessary to assess both the accuracy and confidence in the classification solution. Hopefully the days of word clouds based on keyword counting will soon be far behind us.

Marketing professionals also need to know if the conversation is helping or hurting a specific brand or product. **Sentiment,** the negative or positive disposition of a conversation, has historically been difficult to measure especially with the current tools available in the marketplace. An early pilot evaluated sentiment in relation to a NY Times article about Microsoft. Wildly different sentiment metrics were found between data that was hand-coded and multiple social media platforms. The problem with out-of-the-box automatic sentiment offered with most social media tools is the inaccuracy of measurement of negative or positive tendencies in social media content. In fact out-of-the-box sentiment can miss important things present in everyday conversation like negation of positives, implied negatives and sentences that contain multiple messages with differing sentiment. Best-in-class tools enable the ability to individually tune sentiment by the word or phrase so that it accurately captures the meaning within context. When measuring sentiment – **trusting a "black box" is too risky…**

Insight Generation

Systematic listening and reliable measurement are prerequisites for generating insights from social media content. Without effectively identifying what content to listen to, what are the themes people are talking about and understanding how they feel about it via sentiment measurement it's nearly impossible to understand the story emerging from social media conversations about a particular topic, brand or product. It's aspects of this story that enables the **generation of insights** to address any business concern.

Social media provides rich and time sensitive data that can be aligned with events and other sources of intelligence to provide a holistic picture of any business concern. Aligning disparate data sources with social media data enables the identification of correlations between actions and market perceptions. Changes in volume and sentiment within social media conversations can be indicative of the impact of an event or marketing initiative and provide rich context to supplement traditional market research and other relevant business data. Secondary data sources can also be supplemented by social media content, particularly as analysts attempt to assess forecasts or trends based on social media data and analytics.

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Do Social Media Insights Replace Survey Research?
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Insights from social media data should never be considered a replacement for other types of research. It does, however, provide a raw and unmediated look at top of mind issues on product experiences and emerging topics relevant to any business. The pace at which social media can be updated provides marketing professionals as close to a real-time look at changes in perceptions and opinions as is available in the marketplace today. It's this integration of social media intelligence with traditional data sources that provides the rich and contextual understanding of the market that enables real insight generation.

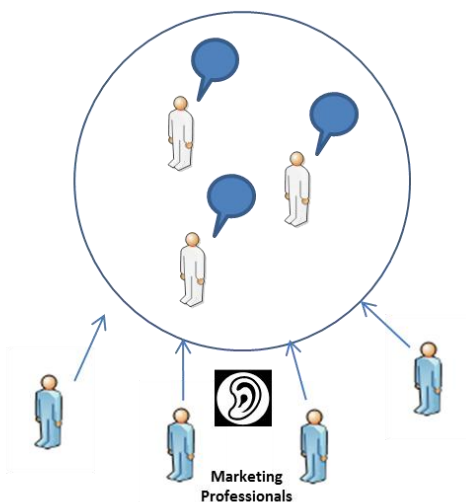Traditional Survey Research vs. Social Media Intelligence
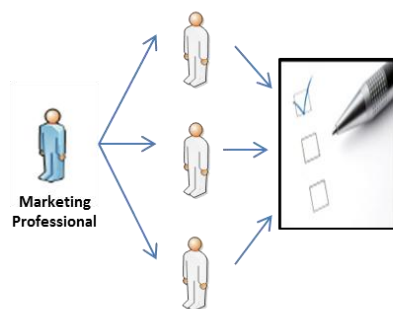
Social Media Intelligence: Now What?

Ultimately the purpose of this framework for social media intelligence is to provide marketing professionals the ability to **take action**. Insights from social media can be applied across the marketing spectrum including the market research, advertising, product development & management, customer support and public relations disciplines. **Systematic listening** can help with the discovery of new areas of opportunity or identify potential areas of concern. **Reliable measurement** can help determine which marketing activities have the greatest impact on customer perceptions & behavior. **Insight generation** can help achieve a true understanding of the competitive threat among key customer segments.

Conclusion

The rise of social media provides marketing professionals exciting opportunities to reach and interact with their customers in new and exciting ways. Through technology this channel provides marketing professionals unprecedented access to a wealth of raw customer perceptions on a wide range of topics relevant to any business. There are also many potential pitfalls that accompany this access especially when determining how to make sense of it all. It's critical that marketing professionals have a sound and well-reasoned approach to social media intelligence in order to take full advantage of all that social media data can provide. To successfully measure impact one must focus on the right content, the right people and the conversations that matter the most. This requires employing a wealth of robust tools to move beyond a traditional web analytics approach to enable the insights necessary to take action. Because in the end, knowing how many Facebook fans you have isn't nearly enough.

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[i] Comscore estimates are based on their Media Metrix report for worldwide social network usage for users over the age of 15, March 2011.

[ii] Comscore estimates are from the Media Metrix Key Measures for the US report (April 2011) – for all age groups.

[iii] http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2010/3/Facebook_and_Twitter_Access_via_Mobile_Browser_Grows_by_Triple-Digits

[iv] http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Older-Adults-and-Social-Media.aspx