Measuring word of mouth

Heather Maitland explores ways of measuring online and offline word-of-mouth initiatives

The starting point of much of the discussion about word of mouth is that it can't be measured. Actually, sociologist Gabriel Tarde first explored it in 1898.[1]

Social psychologists are fascinated by social influence so have developed models to describe why people are so keen to make recommendations to each other. Researchers have shown that these apply online and offline. Shintaro Okazaki describes how motivations spring from two sources: individual desire and social intention.[2] The individual wants a sense of accomplishment from passing on helpful information to others, the added social status that comes from having their opinions listened to and to have fun. The social intention centres on an explicit or unspoken agreement between the members of a community to act in a certain way. The more someone feels they fit into a group, and the more social status and power they have within the group, the more likely they are to make recommendations. In offline communities, the pressure to conform to other members' expectations is an important factor. It is less important online because members are anonymous.

So that's the who, how and why of word of mouth, but marketers also want to understand what is being said and how many are listening.

A simple question tackles the first issue: 'How likely are you to recommend my events or activities to a friend?' Those who respond positively are known as promoters and negative responders are detractors. A Net Promoter Score, the percentage of promoters minus the percentage of detractors, allows comparisons between organisations.[3]

Harris Interactive's research last year warns that people are more likely to chat about their experiences with products, sharing information rather than doing anything as specific as making a recommendation.[4] Being willing to make a recommendation is not necessarily the same thing as doing it.

Choosing the right thing to measure is important, too. A Harvard Business School study[5] concludes that it's not enough to count the number of conversations about a product or brand or the number of people having those conversations. An intention to recommend something is the result of having experienced it. It doesn't mean that it will generate future sales. Word of mouth could be circulating only among people who have seen it, done it and already bought the t-shirt. The researchers measured the buzz about new TV programmes. There was no link between the volume of word of mouth and the eventual ratings. What predicted the success or failure of the show was the number of new people who heard the word of mouth, known as the dispersion rate. How do they know all this? Okazaki's review of the research since 2004 lists a set of familiar research methods:

- telephone interviews
- in-depth interviews
- analysis of online user-driven content
- web-based surveys, for example of registered users of a forum
- email questionnaires sent, for example, to people involved in a viral political campaign asking who sent what to who
- focus groups.

The *Guardian*'s research last year into word of mouth used simple methods – interviews and a nationally representative telephone survey – to compile a complex audit of how a large number of people communicate with each other and the strength of the links between them.[6] Take a look at http://prescribethenation.com to see Unilever's map of how word of

mouth about a moisturiser spread through the Alaskan town of Kodiak.[7]

Measuring word of mouth is not rocket science, then. So why are so many marketers convinced that word of mouth is unmeasurable? What they really mean is that word of mouth is uncontrollable. Marketers hate the idea that there are thousands of conversations going on that they have nothing to do with. The research methods available to them involve sampling, so they can be unreliable. They want to eavesdrop on every conversation.

So thank goodness for the internet. What people say is written down and easily accessible and there are plenty of free eavesdropping tools. Some, like SocialMention and Social Media Firehose, search for key phrases across a wide range of social media, while Technorati specifically searches blogs and posts. Google Alerts monitors its own search network and will send an email when it finds a key phrase.

Some social networking services have their own internal search functions like Twitter Search and Facebook's Lexicon. Jodange has downloadable widgets that analyse how people are feeling about a topic rather than just showing what they say. None of these tools are comprehensive so need to be used in combination.[8]

But can we make assumptions about offline word of mouth based on online behaviour? Harris Interactive showed that purchasing decisions are complex, resulting from a combination of online and offline information and opinion sources. Although 18 to 24 year olds were more likely than older adults to use social networking sites to find information, the proportion that did so was only 16%. They were much more likely to get information about products through face-to-face conversations with friends and family. Even where the word of mouth was about a new technology launch, only

35% of conversations took place on blogs, discussion boards and social networking sites. Half took place face to face.[9] Although we can eavesdrop online, the traditional offline research tools are still essential.

So word of mouth is easily measured. Evaluating its impact is much more difficult. So what if over a million people have played your shoot 'em up MMO game set in a gallery? Did it persuade anyone to visit or was it just a load of hot air? ●

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1. **Gabriel Tarde**, 'L'Opinion et la Foule', *Revue de Paris*, 1898. Cited by **Jeffrey Graham** and **William Havlena**, 'Finding the "Missing Link": Advertising's Impact on Word of Mouth, Web Searches, and Site Visits', *Journal of Advertising Research*, Dec. 2007, pp. 427–35.

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3. **Deborah Eastman**, 'Clearing the Air about Word of Mouth', 2008. Consulted at www.marketingprofs.com/8/clearing-air-about-word-of-mouth-eastman.asp on 12/2/2010.

4. **Harris Interactive**, 'Offline Social Word of Mouth Influence on Brand Decision-Making More Frequent and More Powerful than Online Social Media', The Harris Poll, consulted at www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/pubs/Harris_Poll_2009_06_15.pdf on 15/2/2010.

5. **David Godes** and **Dina Mayzlin**, 'Using Online Conversations to Study Word of Mouth Communication', HBS Working Knowledge. Consulted at www.som.yale.edu/faculty/dm324/MktgScience_galley.pdf on 15/2/2010.

6. Consulted at www.slideshare.net/womuk/guardian-wom-research-300909 on 12/2/2010.

7. Cited by **Walter Carl** at http://wom-study.blogspot.com. Consulted on 12/2/2010.

8. Find out more from **Susan Hallam**'s comprehensive overview of social media eavesdropping tools at www.shcl.co.uk/blog/2009/02/monitoring-your-digital-footprint.html and **Clay McDaniel**'s selection at www.marketingprofs.com/9/essential-social-media-listening-tools-mcdaniel.asp. Consulted on 15/2/2010.

9. **Walter Carl**, 'Is Talking Getting You Anywhere? Measuring WOM Marketing', *Admap*, World Advertising Resource Centre, April 2009.