Identifying Consumer Signals in the Digital Noise

Social media and search traffic yield huge insights, but they are only valuable when delivered with actionable advice on how to drive brand growth

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Big data is transforming the way marketers work, but with so much consumer data available today the real challenge is how to mine it. While new data sources like search and social media can enhance the understanding of consumer behavior, marketers need reliable and consistent metrics to make good decisions.

FROM BIG DATA TO RELEVANT DATA

The major advantage of digital big data is that it provides marketers with a means to keep a finger on their brand's pulse in real-time. The data is freely available, but to use the data well it's simply not enough to aggregate and trend it. The data needs to yield insights that can feed into the decisions that marketers *actually* make, when they need to make them.

To be truly useful, search and social data should be deconstructed in the same way that sales data has been treated historically. This means breaking the activity down into its component parts: immediate, short-term and long-term trends, and relating them to sales, brand health and campaign performance.

SHORT-TERM INDICATORS OF CAMPAIGN IMPACT

Search and social data typically respond strongly to changes in media spend (both positively and negatively), but the size of the movement in each area reflects different things about an ad campaign.

Search volumes show a bigger increase for ads that include news so we see a strong relationship between the persuasive power of an ad and people seeking information. Marketers need to determine if growth in search volume is keeping their brand top of mind among consumers (building salience), or simply driving up search for the whole category.

In contrast with search, the short-term lifts we see in social are heavily influenced by the overall quality of the creative. Comparing the magnitude of uplift in conversation for a given level of spend with Millward Brown's Awareness Index Measures shows much greater increases for ads with higher impact.

These short-term effects give brands an early, in-market read on campaign performance. But again, marketers need to look beyond the size of the overall uplift. Which ads are over-indexing on social response, and which messages are under-indexing? Is this because of a change in reach, in placement, or in the creative content? When we dig deeper into the drivers of social response at this level brands become empowered to make early decisions, and can optimize or switch out creative that may be underperforming.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIC BRAND PLANNING INDICATORS

Trends in search volume for a brand will show changes in salience and levels of active consumer interest over time. In social, long-term trends reflect changes in the talkability of the brand. Both search and social signals provide useful but different information. Social signals are often linked to perceptions like a brand being seen by consumers as innovative. This is because people will search for brands with a high salience, but they will only talk about brands they feel are worthy of comment.

This type of data lets us understand trends in the performance of individual brands over time to see which are declining and which are on the rise. But, we also need to understand why things are changing. This is where survey based equity research still complements behavioral insights. Marketers still need to diagnose the components behind overall brand strength to shape strategic growth plans.

LEVERAGING SOCIAL DATA – WHEN SHOULD A BRAND TAKE ACTION?

Not every Twitter storm will have a lasting impact. The fact that Kate Moss is removed from an EasyJet flight for being disruptive likely won't have a lasting impact on the EasyJet brand, but it will send social buzz related to EasyJet through the roof. It's important for a brand to be able to identify the real importance of events like these.

Applying statistical models to social data will identify short term spikes but marketers need to understand the potential of the specific conversation to have a longer-term impact on brand health. In addition to the volume of positive or negative comments, it's important for marketers to understand the nature of the content. Are consumers talking about the brand experience, the brand's ads or the celebrities in those ads? The first is more likely to have a long- term impact on the brand. Second, we need to understand whether that conversation is translating into an impact on brand perceptions and consumer behaviors, and by how much. Connecting the dots in this way is vital to understanding whether the social spikes are indicative of a longer term problem or short-term noise.

FROM ANECDOTE TO APPLICATION

Breaking-down insights that are available from search and social data empowers brands to make better decisions. Brands need to understand how the data changes and why it's changing in order to take the right actions. It's time for big data tracking to move from anecdote to application.

Key Takeaways

- **Judicious use of big data helps marketers make timely decisions when the data is analyzed and linked to specific outcomes**

- **Short-term effects give marketers an early in-market read on campaign performance and enable them to optimize creative content and rotation**

- **Longer-term signals from search and social data help brands understand their competitive standing over time**