

Measuring online buzz

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It can be difficult to know what to **measure** and what is **important** when **tracking online buzz**.

Given the wealth of companies currently offering a variety of buzz tracking services it can be **difficult to decide who to choose** and **which metrics are important**.

To help alleviate some of this confusion ævolve have gathered some of the **key points to consider** when **planning, or trying to determine how successful, a campaign has been**.

In addition we have also **included an overview of our approach, Buzz Chemistry, and case studies of how we have used the findings to make a difference to our clients' campaigns**.



Considerations when measuring online buzz

1) Don't accept the numbers at face value...

It's obviously important to understand certain key metrics such as volume. However caution is needed as the results may only be telling part of the story. This is due to the limitations of certain software tools to understand contextual usage of brand terms or campaign elements. For example, a brand may be mentioned in a blog but may not be part of the conversation. E.g. 'we met by the Coke Machine' will be included in the volumetrics search for Coca Cola, despite this only being a geographical reference and not about the brand per se. Boolean searches are getting increasingly sophisticated, and can minimise the issue to an extent, but if you're pulling your own reports from a free service like Google Blog Search or Nielsen Buzz Metrics it is well worth checking back over the data to ensure there are no glaring errors.

It's worth noting that you should expect that some of the blogs, twitter feeds and forums returned will be as a result of misattribution (e.g. some engines fail to distinguish between sponsored links or advertising and blog content, where people may only make passing reference to a brand rather than be actually discussing it). When the volume returned is high (in the thousands) this is less of a problem, as then these errors are relatively insignificant in the face of the overwhelming majority that are accurate. The issue is that in our experience, results are often only in the hundreds (or lower). This is when it becomes a real problem. You wouldn't trust the accuracy of a survey if it was only asked of 30 people, so why should you trust volumetrics based on the same number?

2) Qualitative research is vital....

Yes, measurement is important, but in our experience numbers and statistics sometimes do not provide the insight and actionability that clients need to answer the question 'what do we need to do differently?' especially within the context of an ongoing campaign.

Whilst it's valuable to understand the volume of buzz around a brand or a campaign and where and when this occurred, you also need to understand why people are saying what they are. To do this effectively, you need to undertake an element of qualitative research, gathering insight around the brand or campaign online. ævolve's approach involves our qualitative researchers treating twitter feeds, blogs, websites and suchlike as a data set within which to perform rigorous qual analysis.

3) Be careful of over-promise...

Alongside volume, many buzz measurement tools claim to be able to deliver insight around several key areas (e.g. sentiment or influence). Whilst offerings in these areas are getting stronger and more accurate, we'd still suggest a degree of caution if your results deliver the following:

Sentiment insight: Searching for 'good' and 'bad' words and allocating sentiment accordingly can be problematic. A high level of cultural understanding and contextual allowance is needed on behalf of the researcher to meaningfully interpret sentiment and question marks exist over current software's ability to deliver this. To use a slightly outdated example, the cultural agreement amongst kids back in the 90's that if something good or impressive should be referred to as 'bad', would cause huge problems for sentiment scoring in today's buzz measurement tools.

Influence measurement: This is also very hard to robustly identify within buzz measurement. Existing models of 'influence' work on the basis that the more blogs link into/reference another blog, the more influential that blog is. But if lots of people read your blog, how can you tell if it is having an impact? Alternatively some niche blogs or posts may be having a relatively greater influence albeit on a smaller number of people.

Blogger profiles: It's really difficult to find out exactly who is generating the buzz. Comscore can give you profiles of the visitors to the sites where buzz around your clients brand or campaign is occurring, but can't understand exactly who is saying what in the way you can with traditional survey based or qualitative research. This means that at the moment, audience profile can only be inferred (from language used, demographic profile of the site etc)

ævolve don't believe that these problems are insurmountable, just things to bear in mind. Again, we find that qualitatively analysing online buzz gives you the 'human element' needed to interpret and sense check sentiment, audiences and infer influence.

4) Think about pre-campaign research as well as post campaign evaluation...

As valuable as it is to get feedback on how a campaign has performed, we believe that is also important that clients fully understand the environment they are entering into when considering social media. Examining existing buzz can give you invaluable insight into how a campaign could be structured or executed. By taking time to understanding the target audience and how they react in specific environments, and by looking at tone, language and 'buzzworthiness' of topics, we believe it is possible to formulate a much more effective strategy and campaign.



ævolve's approach

ævolve have developed a product, Buzz Chemistry, which is designed to arm clients and agency personnel alike with media actionable understanding of online buzz.

Our methodology seeks to fuse campaign metrics, buzz measurement and qualitative interpretation.



Buzz
Chemistry

Key Objectives Buzz Chemistry can answer

- *Where, and why, are large amounts of buzz being generated?*
 - What are the genres of sites where the campaign is being talked about?
 - Within this, what specific sites are most prominent?
- *What are the motivations and drivers for those generating and responding to this buzz?*
 - What are the key elements of a campaign that are driving online buzz
 - What are the triggers of 'talk-ability' online in terms of content, tone, creative execution etc?
 - Which elements appear to be driving discussion on key campaign metrics online (trial, purchase)?
 - What shape does this conversation take (blogs, two way interaction, comments, news articles)?
 - How does this fit into, enhance or change the shape of general conversation around the category or a clients brand?
- *How does the shape of conversation and buzz around the campaign evolve and shift over time?*
 - Emerging, strengthening or dwindling themes that are being discussed online
 - Are the online areas that are discussing the campaign changing (evolving from specialist fans forums into more mainstream blogs for example)?

Case studies

Conducting an online audit to inform comms planning and strategy

In July 2009 a high street retailer launched a new online brand targeting an audience younger than their traditional customer. Social media was identified as one of the key drivers in assisting the launch. This primarily was due to the continuous insights it could provide and the way these insights could be used to shape and develop the wider media strategy.

The client had particular interest in the role of 'insiders' (influential fashion, shopping and celebrity bloggers) and wanted to understand how they could best use them in dialogues with consumers online. As well as this they were keen to gain insights from the insiders that would help develop the website content in a more consumer centric way.

It was with this in mind that ævolve conducted a Buzz Chemistry piece of research and explored online conversations in each of the 3 areas. The results were directly actionable and gave the client knowledge into the significance, sentiments and online behaviours of these 'insiders' and their followers.

Understanding how advertising contributes to and changes online conversations

A media owner released a film over the summer of 2009. This client wanted to understand the effect that their paid for advertising had in stimulating and changing the levels and shape of online buzz, in order to tailor communications strategies for similar titles going forward.

We did an initial audit to understand 'natural' levels of buzz; then monitored how this changed through the launch of paid-for comms through to the release date and beyond.

The research enabled the team to think about strategies for stimulating buzz within the younger target audience as well as areas to concentrate paid for activity to create further buzz.



Conclusion

Insight and buzz measurement tools and approaches will continue to play an important part in the industry going forward. However we need to be careful that expectation placed on these new approaches does not exceed its capacity to deliver, especially in this period of relative infancy.

At ævolve, we are guarded yet excited. Whilst still work in progress, our Buzz Chemistry approach (with the emphasis on qualitative insight, supported by volumetric and campaign data) is a strong step in the right direction. Going forward we plan to continue to develop it, fusing this offer with the excellent work going on in the area of social media measurement within the other agencies of the Aegis network.

Watch this space.

