Beyond Listening

Social Media - a compelling source of consumer Insights.

Geeta Lobo, Executive Director, Social Intelligence Analytics (SIA), Ipsos India provides insights into how marketers can leverage the potential of Social Data

The sheer reach of social data is mind boggling – it has permeated geographies and User Generated Content (UGC) is loaded with interesting conversations across a plethora of topics – brands, news, experiences, et al.

Various estimates indicate that there are around 4 billion active users worldwide, spending over two hours online each day on social platforms and over half of the population on earth right now, have the means to exchange information, voice their opinions and project their ideas at their fingertips, all the time.

So clearly, there is exposure to thoughts, activities, and foibles of their peers all the time that provoke response.

Implications for marketing and communication

Unexplored potential

This age of hyper-connectivity has changed the paradigm for marketers and brand custodians, who now see the locus of influence shifting gradually, but definitively towards the consumers. It is as though the innocuous word-of-mouth has acquired multiple superpowers all at once. In response, social media management finds its way into brand strategies across sectors ranging from media, tech platform-based services, durables, and consumer goods.

In popular imagination, mining social data for insights conjures up visions of deceptive data capture, powerful algorithms, complex analytics driving nefarious objectives. Visions of mind control. But there are vast volumes of data in public forum, which can be leveraged to understand the minds of the consumers better, based on what they choose to share, in a manner compliant with GDPR guidelines and Indian data regulations.

Stages in the use of social data: There are different ways in which brand managers and marketers can use this data. The differences are not just in terms of the extent to which resources and attention is invested in social data but the intent and purposes that drive the investment. In planning for investments in social media insights there are two clear considerations:

Purpose - Will it be used for monitoring marketing activities or also for understanding consumers and categories?

Approach - Will it be used for its **diagnostic powers** or is there an attempt to **scan this data proactively to identify emerging opportunities and risks**.

Based on the above considerations there are four categories of social data users.

The first stage of deploying social data is when marketers steer brand campaigns using social media metrics. The most evolved stage is when marketers are streaming in the emerging trends to inform their decisions and strategic plans. The other two categories represent an intermediate level of evolution.

	Diagnostic approach	**Proactive approach**
Only Monitor	**1** *Social Listening Metrics*	**2** *Brand tracks based on social data*
Monitor & Understand	**3** *Category needs studies*	**4** *Macro trend analysis*

Going beyond social metrics

Most marketing teams now also have dedicated social listening desk working the medium and leveraging influencers to deliver boosted visibility to campaigns. Few have also gone beyond just assessing social listening metrics. Even pushing for more than just Stage 1 type of engagement can yield very promising results.

Take the instance of a well-known personal care brand which had identified an emotive territory that could provide the brand a greater connect and relevance to consumers' lives. An evocative campaign crafted to land this message received a cold shoulder from the consumers. Social metrics affirmed what primary (survey) data indicated. The audience did not connect the communication with this brand. A typical marketing response would be to dial up the branding in the advertisement. But examination of social conversations over a longer term helped uncover the source of apathy. The message, which was liked by itself, was complete mismatch for the brand. The conversations about the brand in the period preceding and during the campaign showed that the salient advertisements associated with the brand were ones about variants and SKUs – all of which were in a rather light-hearted emotive space. The biggest revelation came by examining the comments about the advertisement with negative sentiment. Such negative comments are very hard to obtain through direct enquiry. The rather enlightened social context shown in the advertisement was making viewers uncomfortable. They were questioning the propriety of such a message from a 'family' brand, couched in sarcastic comments about Indian culture and family values. The social data analysis helped convey effectively, the correction needed went far beyond simply improving brand recall. Some guidance on refining the proposition and the brand narrative were also obtained.

Towards understanding consumer minds

The reason why social conversations can be harnessed to do so much more lies in the very nature of this data.

Sensitive barometer of sentiments

The data is spontaneously and continually generated as people go about their lives, an in-situ reflection of activities and thoughts. This makes it the most dynamic and sensitive barometer of perceptions.

Two-way mirror

The power of social data lies in the fact that it reflects popular perceptions and is a pivotal source of information that is shaping those perceptions. It is both the communication and the response all at once. In most markets, we now see growing segments of people who primarily rely on social media for critical information such as breaking news.

Driver of behaviour change

It is also a powerful influence for behavioural change. Information from social media can demonstrate in a more relatable way and provide social validation both of which are critical levers for changing behaviour.

An evolved approach to using social data would involve leveraging these super-powers. A recent collaboration with a multi-category manufacturer, involved mining social data for whitespaces in health and wellness. Exploration of the pandemic conversations identified four well defined wellness and health spaces relevant for the category in focus. Further analysis revealed which of these had the most under-served needs. Finally, by comparing the trend of these need-spaces with the trends from search data, we could identify the spaces which had more immediate potential. The team in question is now monitoring these whitespaces closely based on social conversations, looking out both for the trends and change in the character of these need-spaces.

Marketers and strategic functions across sectors have recognized the need to tap into social data. But this is just the beginning of a journey. Given the nature of this data and its inherent powers it can transform the way consumer insights drive marketing decisions. Improved data analytics capabilities and growing base of social media users will only accelerate this evolution. An evolved use of social data insights is the closest we can get, to truly understanding the minds of the consumers.