



Social-Media Impact

Balancing Metrics and Insight for Advertising Success

Brands can benefit from advertising in social-media space. The approaches offer a means to engage consumers, enhance brand reputation and image, build positive brand attitudes, improve organic search rankings, and drive traffic to brand locations, both on- and off-line. The steps in any advertising campaign will begin with setting campaign objectives and end with assessing the effectiveness of the strategies and tactics to determine the degree of success in accomplishing the stated objectives and to inform the next campaign. The challenge is to develop a set of measures to assess success and plan for future strategies and tactics.

At this stage of development, social-media advertising lacks the standard metrics that have served as a primary advantage for online advertising. Online advertising as a form of direct-response advertising has measurability built into its very existence. Advertisers can measure reach (the number of people exposed to the message) and frequency (the average number of times someone is exposed), and analyze site stickiness (the ability of a site to draw repeat visits and to keep people on a site) and the relative pull of creative presentations (a comparison of the ability

for different creative executions to generate response). They can also monitor clickthroughs (the number of people exposed who click on an online ad or link), sales conversions (the number of people who click-through who then purchase product), and viewthroughs (the number of people who are exposed and do not clickthrough but later visit the brand's Web site). These metrics are applicable to the use of display advertising in social spaces. If L'Oreal buys display ads on Facebook, all of these metrics are available to gauge effectiveness.

However, for the more innovative approaches available, metrics like number of unique visitors, page views, frequency of visits, average visit length, and clickthrough rates are either totally inappropriate or irrelevant, or simply fail to capture information about the objectives of a social-media advertising campaign. Our tendency is to count—count impressions, visitors, friends, posts, players. There is a place for numbers. For instance, knowing the number of community members involved in brand-related conversations can serve as an indicator of exposure, and the number of message threads and lines of text within a thread can serve as proxies of conversation depth. However, counting does not capture the essence of the interaction consumers had with the brand, the degree of engagement felt during and after the interaction, or the effects of the interaction, exposure to brand messages, and brand engagement on measures like brand likability, brand image, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand affiliation, congruency, and purchase intent. Jeep may have 8,500 MySpace friends, but the number does nothing to tell us how the friends feel about Jeep. An ARG may boast millions of players, but the sheer quantity of players does not reveal the success of the strategy. To measure outcomes of social advertising, organizations must balance quantitative metrics with qualitative insights.

■ The Measurement Process

The appropriate approaches to measurement will vary depending upon the campaign's objectives and the social-media strategies and tactics used. However, these are the basic steps any measurement program should include.

Step 1: Review the objectives set for the campaign.

Step 2: Map the components of the social-media strategy used in the campaign.

Step 3: Determine the criteria that will be used to assess the achievement of objectives, and the tools necessary to measure the criteria.

Step 4: Establish a baseline or benchmark with which one can compare accomplishments.

Step 5: Analyze the effectiveness of the campaign components given the outcomes measured and propose changes appropriate for moving forward.

Step 6: Keep measuring.

■ Reviewing Objectives

Step 1, reviewing the campaign objectives, assumes that the objectives were set prior to pursuing advertising opportunities in social media. Not all brands set formal objectives. Some are simply experimenting with social media, and for them the experience of executing a campaign using emerging platforms is sufficient. For most brands, though, failing to set clear objectives is a mistake. When it comes to assessing success, if there are no objectives, how do you know if where you ended up is where you wanted to be? The specific objectives identified can vary dramatically from brand to brand but usually encompass three overarching issues: (1) motivating some action like visits to a Web site or sales, (2) affecting brand knowledge and attitudes, and (3) accomplishing the first two with fewer resources than might be required with other advertising and promotional methods.

■ Mapping the Campaign

Step 2 calls for mapping all of the social-media aspects of the advertising campaign. This activity results in a visual representation of the tactics used and how they may interact. Mapping is a technique advocated by Chris Brogan on his blog (<http://chrisbrogan.com>). In a post entitled “Measuring Social Media Efforts,” he explains that maps can be crude, simple drawings but even a rough sketch can be valuable as brands seek to measure accomplishments in the social-media space. A map would display the types of branded messages produced and distributed (e.g., written vehicles like blog posts and white papers, ads in the form of display ads or rich media video, and podcasts) and invitations for consumer engagement with the brand (e.g., games, consumer-generated advertising contests and promotions, and interactive brand experiences) as well as the online location for these materials. It should also include online locations where content relating to the brand may be distributed by others. For instance, are there viral videos on YouTube that highlight the brand? Are there product reviews on sites like Epinions.com? Are there MySpace pages with brand icons and information posted? Are there bloggers

writing about the brand? Are members of del.icio.us tagging the brand's Web site, and are Digg members voting for branded content?

Once all the sources of brand information are identified, the map should sketch out the chain of touch points possible. A touch point is simply a contact point between the brand and the consumer. Mini Cooper "touches" a consumer when someone visits the dealer showroom, visits the Mini Web site or one of its microsites, receives brochures and other promotional material from the company, or brings a car in for service. These are all brand-controlled touch points, but many touch points that the brand does not control do exist, especially online. In addition to the consumer-generated content that relates to the brand, there may be conversational touch points going on. Are people reading the blog postings (or even responding to blog posts) that mention the brand? Are people watching videos posted on sites like YouTube? Are they voting for content on Digg? In other words, is the media (whether brand-generated or consumer-generated) being consumed by those it reaches and is it being "fortified" (as in CFM)? Ultimately, the map should show four levels of contact: (1) brand-generated content, (2) consumer-generated content, (3) consumer-fortified content, and (4) exposures to content consumers.

■ Choosing Criteria and Tools of Measurement

In step 3, the criteria for assessing effectiveness are determined, and the tools necessary for measurement are selected. The objectives and the map should direct the identification of criteria, as well as the best tools. For example, imagine that Secret deodorant seeks to develop brand awareness for two new products, Secret Clinical Strength deodorant and Secret Scent Expressions body spray. It also wants to drive traffic to the product Web sites and increase sales of these products. Lastly, it wants to reinforce Secret's image of celebrating women, their strength and their secrets. The brand enters the social-media space with an advertising campaign, which also includes traditional media components, called Because You're Hot. The campaign, by Leo Burnett Chicago, plays on the definition of "hot" to connect to the efficacy of the Secret brand benefit while recognizing characteristics that make a woman hot (being strong). The Secret Web site and two microsites, www.becauseyourehot.com and www.sparklebodyspray.com, would be sketched on a social-media map, along with other tactics like the Rihanna's Secret MySpace profile (which features Secret Body Spray as a sponsor). Visitors to the Scent Expressions microsite are encouraged to participate in a quiz to identify their ideal

scent, and those visiting the Because You're Hot site can vote on what's hottest using Secret's Hot-o-Meter. Secret also runs a promotion in MTV's Virtual Laguna Beach, encouraging women to "share their secrets." Secret could expand the social-media aspects of the campaign by hosting a blog with contributions from a slate of strong female celebrities, having a virtual dance party with a Jennifer Lopez avatar (to tie in to the dance contest featured in the traditional media component of the campaign) in Second Life, and inviting women to develop videos that capture the essence of the slogan, Because You're Hot. These videos could then be hosted on a Secret channel on YouTube. These are some of the brand-generated messages and invitations for participation in the campaign. Consumers are generating content about Secret. Technorati lists blogs, posts, and videos that mention both products. YouTube also includes videos tagged with Secret deodorant and Secret Scent Expressions. Internet users have opportunities for exposure and can fortify the messages with comments and product reviews.

What criteria and tools then should Secret use to evaluate success of these techniques? Secret's objectives emphasized a desire to (1) build awareness of its new products, (2) drive visits to its Web sites, (3) drive sales, and (4) strengthen the Secret brand image. Objective 2 is easily addressed with traditional Web site metrics and measurement tools. The Secret sites can track hits, page views, and unique visitors; the sites enable registration, which can also be tracked. Organic search engine rankings can also be assessed for the brand name and its slogans. Secret is not performing well on organic search. The word *secret* generates a third-place spot for the Secret brand; the word *deodorant* places Secret in sixth place. Searches with the slogans "Because You're Hot" and "Share Your Secret" result in third-place listings.

Awareness can be suggested with the Web site traffic and traffic to other branded components. For instance, Rihanna's Secret MySpace profile boasts over 24,000 friends, some of whom have fortified the profile with comments. It can also be suggested with brand mentions in other online space. Secret might ask, "Is the brand being talked about? If so, how much, and where?" The criteria for answering these questions are straightforward. One simply needs to identify evidence of the brand in online conversations and publications, get a count of those occurrences, and note the source of the material. The tools necessary for this could include a virtual version of a clipping service to determine what is being said about the brand and the brand's competition online. This can be an in-house project, or outsourced to companies like CyberAlert, which can then monitor specific publications or the entire Internet for brand mentions.

Collecting brand mentions in house can be accomplished with tools like Google Alerts. These tools can provide a count of mentions, and the sources, but they should be combined with other tools to determine whether the communication was positive, negative, or neutral for the brand.

Next Secret might ask, “How many people are exposed to these third-party messages?” To assess the impact of these brand mentions across the Web, one can turn to companies that measure the size of a site’s audience. Media Metrix, Nielsen Net/Ratings, and comScore offer measurement services that include hits, unique visitors, and page views for sites. It will need to consider all the locations of postings mentioning the brand and the audiences for each location.

Secret, in our example, also set out to strengthen its image. Its image can be influenced by what the target audience thinks and feels about the branding for the campaign. Are young women engaged with quick games like the Hot-o-Meter? Is the association strategy using Rihanna and Jennifer Lopez as celebrity endorsers effective? Do they feel that the Scent Expressions quiz and scent recommendations enable Secret as a brand to symbolize their own self images? The campaign itself will influence the brand’s image. Secret may use primary research in the form of surveys and focus groups to answer these questions.

A key to social media is that the consumer-generated content and consumer-fortified content can also influence image. The viral nature of brand-relevant communication is why social media is both an opportunity and a threat for advertisers. To determine the relative influence and nature of that influence on a brand, one must consider the source of content, the relative authority of that source, and the content itself. Katie Delahaye Paine advocates a list of criteria for assessing the influence of blog postings about a brand.¹ It is easily applicable to all forms of social publicity, including mentions in news media (on- and off-line), online comments—whether a blog posting, responses to blog postings, or comments about videos—profiles, photos, message board postings, and online product reviews.

- Is the posting exclusively about the brand or is the brand simply mentioned in passing or along with other competing brands?
- What did the posting seek to accomplish? Did it intend to solve a problem, compare brands, or allow the author to rant or self-promote?
- How many times is the brand mentioned within each posting?
- Did the post include a recommendation about the brand like “do not buy this product”?

- Did the posting include any brand messages like the brand's slogan, mention of brand experiences, or benefits of using the brand?
- Does the post leave readers with a positive or negative impression of the brand?

Brands should gather the comments from all the touch points and social-media sources identified on its map. The comments can then be used as data for a content analysis that will reveal themes, concerns, and insights. Using codes, labels that are used to classify and assign meanings to pieces of information, analysts can use the comments to determine any themes that are reflected in the comments and what, if anything, the brand should do about what is being said. The coding categories used to classify the comments can include context codes to give information on the source of the comment, respondent perspective codes to capture the general viewpoint revealed in the comment, process codes to indicate when over the course of a campaign the comment occurred, relationship codes to indicate relevant alliances present within the social communities, event codes to refer to unique issues, and activity codes to identify comments that require some response by the brand.

Content analysis can be managed in house, jointly, by using a service to collect data and/or conduct the analysis, or be outsourced. Companies like BuzzLogic, Cymfony, Umbria, Narrative Network, and Nielsen BuzzMetrics promise to count and analyze conversations and comments in social-media space to provide insights that can then inform brand strategy. These services take the qualitative data and quantify it. BuzzLogic tracks conversations mentioning brands all over the Internet. It then develops conversation maps with indicators for those who are talking about the brand, whose opinions matter most, and the nature of the content. Oliver Ryan of *Fortune* magazine shares the story of a blogger who, frustrated with his Lenovo ThinkPad's failed hard drive, blasts a negative rant about the brand on his blog.² Within hours of the blog's posting, BuzzLogic notified Lenovo's vice president of global Web marketing, who promptly called the blogger with a promise to resolve the product defect. The blogger was so impressed by the company's response that he shared his pleasure on his blog and the story was then shared with other bloggers. The result was a widespread conversation benefiting the Lenovo brand that grew out of an initial negative post. BuzzLogic offers a range of services for its clients, including lists of the most influential bloggers and their profiles, social maps of the conversations taking place about the client brand, and ad targeting to enable brands to display ads in and around the spaces where relevant conversations are taking place.

The last objective in our Secret example was to drive sales of the two new products. It is more difficult to illustrate the effects of social-media advertising on sales, particularly for a packaged goods product like Secret, which does not sell to end users directly through its Web site. For brands with e-commerce sites, the branded social content will include links to the brand's retail site, and clickthrough and conversion rates can be assessed along with cost per acquisition. Even this does not capture the sales picture completely, for brands sold off- and online, and on multiple sites online. For example, what if the product in question was Rihanna's latest album, *Good Girl Gone Bad*? Sales could take place on multiple retail Web sites and at download sites like iTunes and in physical stores. It would be difficult to track sales conversions that originated with social media. Still, the concept of return on investment can be a useful metric.

Return on Investment

A common metric for gauging success is that of return on investment, or ROI. ROI is a measure of profitability. It captures how effective a company is at using capital to generate profits. Advertising ROI takes the ROI principle and uses it to assess how well an organization applied those financial resources deployed specifically for promotion to profit generation. Calculating ROI requires assigning a financial value to the resources used to execute a strategy, measuring outcomes financially, and calculating the ratio between inputs and outcomes. Return on investment answers the question, how much income was generated from investments in advertising? SMROI (social-media return on investment) seeks to answer the question, how much income was generated from investments in social advertising?

Social-media metrics gurus are working on the development of just such a measure. It is natural that the management would want to quantify the value of a corporate activity and use that value as justification for continuing and expanding the activity. The challenge when it comes to social media is the qualitative, viral, pervasive nature of the outcomes of social-media advertising. Investments in social-media advertising generate goodwill, brand engagement, and momentum, but how can one quantify the value of those outcomes?

A paper by Fraser Likely, David Rockland, and Mark Weiner on measuring the ROI of media relations publicity efforts provides a good road map for measuring SMROI.³ They propose four approaches: (1) return on impressions model, (2) return on media impact model, (3) return on target influence model, and (4) return on earned media model, adapted

here for social-media advertising. The return on impressions model demonstrates how many media impressions were generated by the social-media advertising tactics employed. An impression is simply an “opportunity to see” for the target audience. Online advertisers can buy impressions by paying to have a display ad rotated on a Web site. Social-media advertising provides impressions in a variety of other ways, though. The opportunity for exposure to the brand message might be delivered as part of a virtual-world event, on a social-networking profile site, with consumer-generated ads, product reviews, and so on. Impressions are valuable, according to this model, because we assume that impressions lead to changes in awareness, followed by changes in comprehension, then changes in attitude, and ultimately changes in behavior (sales). Using the percentage of people reached who ultimately purchase as a way to calculate sales value, we can then determine a return on impressions by taking the gross revenue estimated minus the cost of the social-media advertising program divided by the cost of the program. For example, if we estimate that Secret earns \$500,000 in gross revenue due to its social advertising, at a cost of \$100,000, the ROI for the campaign is 400%.

The return on media impact model attempts to track coverage across media and in different markets against sales over time. It requires advanced multiple regression analysis to analyze variables that may affect sales, including the mix of advertising and promotional tools used at each time and place. This approach offers the greatest potential for social-media advertisers because it can include lagged measurements that control for time order of events taking place online (for instance, the timing of an event in a social world, the point at which a profile was activated, the timing of a contest conclusion, and subsequent posting of consumer-generated ads). Return on social-media impact promises to determine how sales can be attributed to each element in a marketing mix and for tactics within the social-media advertising strategy. This is the most complex approach to measurement, requiring data to be compiled and analyzed by the market on a regular basis. Content generation and consumption is tracked and assigned algorithm scores to indicate weight of relative influence. Sales are also tracked at the same intervals, and then statistical analysis is used to determine how sales trends shifted according to the timing of the social-media advertising.

The return on target influence model relies upon survey data to assess the effectiveness of social-media advertising. Surveys assess whether participants were exposed to the social-media advertising tactics and what perceptions they formed as a result of exposure. The model then calls

for calculating the change in the probability of purchase based on the exposure, using binary variable analysis.

The final approach is that of return on earned media model. AEV (advertising equivalency value) is a metric used primarily to equate (albeit crudely) publicity in news media outlets to its paid advertising equivalent. In other words, if a brand had paid for a mention in a specific space, what would it have cost? For social-media advertising, an AEV would attempt to equate source authority, source prominence, depth of brand mention, and recommendation with a paid advertising value. To calculate advertising equivalency, the cost to purchase a display ad on a site would be used to assign a dollar value to the impressions achieved socially. For example, if a display ad on Facebook costs \$50,000 (CPM), we could assign an earned media value of \$50,000 to a thousand page views of our brand profile on Facebook. The value can also be adjusted by the subjective importance of the earned media in question. For example, one might believe that profile visits are more valuable than a display ad rotation because it suggests that visitors sought out the brand interaction. The earned media value can be adjusted to account for variables like the popularity of the location, the relative influence of the source, and so on. The ROI calculation is then based on the difference between the AEV and the cost of the social-media advertising program divided by the cost of the program. For example, if the AEV for the Facebook profile is \$50,000 but it cost \$5,000 in time for its development and maintenance, the incremental gain is \$45,000. The gain divided by the cost of the program expressed as a percentage reveals a ROI of 900%. This measure may be among the easiest to execute for those social-media spaces that also sell display advertising. However, it is not, truly, a return on investment measure so much as it is a measure of effective resource utilization.

Simple Ways to Start

Clearly, one can seek to measure effectiveness using a variety of criteria, approaches, and tools. Some advertisers, though, will want simple yet relevant metrics that are easier to assess than complex models of impact based on algorithm scores and advanced econometrics. Michael Brito highlights several engagement metrics in a blog posting on *Search Engine Journal*.⁴

- Content consumption: Who is interacting with and consuming the brand-generated and consumer-generated content?

- **Content fortification:** Who is fortifying content by continuing the conversation with response posts? How is the content fortified? What does the nature of the fortification say about the brand?
- **Content sharing:** Who is adding content to sites like del.icio.us, Reddit, and Stumbleupon? Who is recommending content at sites like Digg? At what rate are those exposed to the brand messages sharing the content with others using tools like “tell a friend”?
- **Content loyalty:** How many consumers have subscribed to branded content with RSS feeds or by registering for site access?
- **Content conversations:** Who is discussing the brand? Who is linking to brand Web sites? Technorati, a blog search engine, enables one to search for a domain to identify blogs that link there. For comments to brand content, what is the comment to post ratio?
- **Content engagement:** Who is friending the brand on social-networking profiles? Are friends sharing brand content like branded widgets? Are they sharing brand stories? Are consumers visiting brand experiences in virtual worlds? Are consumers contributing consumer-generated ads (whether organic or incented) to sites like YouTube? Brands should track views of profiles, number of friends, and the affect toward the brand reflected in the content shared.

In step 4, the brand establishes a baseline or benchmark with which one can compare accomplishments. In other words, knowing how many people friended Rihanna’s Secret profile on MySpace does not really mean anything unless one has a point of comparison. If we note that other brand profiles typically have an average of 10,000 friends, the Secret profile seems successful. The average serves as a benchmark for gauging the success of the tactic. The point of comparison may be past attempts for the brand (like comparing the number of friends for Secret’s last MySpace profile to the one used for the current campaign) or an industry benchmark or a benchmark from a specific competitor, when data are available for comparison purposes.

In step 5, the effectiveness of the campaign is determined based on the work conducted in steps 3 and 4, and changes for future strategies are proposed. This is a critical point. Without using the results of measurement as feedback for the future, the assessment is of limited value. Lastly, step 6 is a continuous process: keep measuring. Over time, brands will learn what works for them in the Web 2.0 world.

■ **Detective Work and Other Sources of Online Insight**

This final chapter focuses on measuring success of advertising online, and specifically with social media. But brands can use research

techniques to do more than just measure success. Web 2.0 offers the opportunity to study social media in the context of social communities. Online research can take on many forms, mimicking various off-line versions. These forms include surveys, experiments, focus groups and interviews, and observations. The vast majority consists of Web-based surveys, but for advertisers using social media, two online research techniques hold great promise: online focus groups and netnography.

The role of market research is to provide decision makers with data relevant to marketing strategy. It provides a primary tool for exploring opportunities and markets, and testing ideas and concepts. When conducted online, discovery is fast and relatively inexpensive. Perhaps most important, online research studies consumers in the environment of interest. It is for this reason that social-media advertisers should consider complementing what they learn from their assessment programs and content analysis with primary research of consumers in an online space.

Online Focus Groups

Although online focus groups offer many of the same advantages as Web surveys (lower costs, speed, access to geographically dispersed participants and markets that are difficult to recruit), adoption of this approach has been far slower. In large part, this is due to the loss of information provided by nonverbal cues as well as other minor challenges. Focus groups are standard procedure for any study requiring a depth of inquiry into a topic. They are useful for generating ideas, screening new products, identifying underlying attitudes to product concepts and brands, discovering shopping intentions, evaluating creative concepts, and acquiring a depth of understanding about consumer behavior. Groups are flexible; they may disguise the study's purpose or not and vary in the extent to which they follow a structured guide. In addition, groups provide limited exposure to concepts that can protect information from exposure to competition.

Online focus groups offer the benefits of traditional focus groups as well as other benefits not commonly associated with in-person groups. One of their greatest advantages when conducted online is their appropriateness for dealing with sensitive topics. Further, there appears to be less inhibition and editing of thoughts among participants in online groups. Unrelated chatting and extensive input from one or a few participants is also less common. *Prima facie*, then, it might seem that online focus groups should be preferred by researchers as they resolve many of the problems associated with traditional groups. Unfortunately, online

groups have their own set of challenges. Chief among these are the lack of nonverbal cues, the reliance upon typing to relay information, and the potential for technical difficulties in the focus group process. Still, given the advantages of online focus groups and the prevalence of focus groups for advertising research, we anticipate a growth in this application.

Groups can be conducted asynchronously using an online message board format or synchronously using a virtual facility and chat software. Respondents see all of the moderator's questions and the comments of other participants as they are submitted into the dialogue stream. Identities are protected by the use of pseudonyms. Clients observing the session can submit notes to the moderator, but respondents cannot see these entries.

The basic stages of the research process are similar for online groups as for those conducted off-line: setting objectives, recruiting and screening participants, developing discussion guides, moderating, and conducting data analysis. Most research companies offering online focus groups will provide turnkey solutions, including recruitment, screening, and facilities. Just as with off-line groups, recruitment may involve a variety of methods from using established lists, advertising for participants, or even telephone recruiting. The following guidelines are important considerations for managing the initial process:

- Develop screeners who can disqualify respondents without divulging the reasons for dismissal.
- Use blocks on e-mail addresses of disqualified potential respondents to discourage them from trying again.
- Provide invitations with passwords, instructions, dates, and times to those who are qualified for participation.
- Ask participants to visit the site in advance of the group to ensure that technology is compatible.
- Provide technical support contact information for all participants.

Just as in the case of off-line groups, the show rates for those recruited do vary from situation to situation; generally, it is wise to recruit 50%–100% more than what is desired in attendance. Although weather and traffic, two constant concerns for focus group participation off-line, are not concerns online, other factors remain, including lack of commitment on the part of those recruited, familiarity with the online venue, and other personal issues that can inhibit attendance. As recruits join the virtual room, rescreening should take place. During the rescreening,

participant identities can be confirmed (to the extent possible), and if too many are available for participation, the moderator and client can select those who will remain.

The moderator and preparation of the guide is of utmost importance in an online venue. The questions must be prepared in advance and should even be preloaded for easy submission when needed. Because the moderator must read responses, assess how to reply, develop and administer probes, and determine when to administer the next question (and what that question should be), he or she should minimize the amount of typing necessary. For synchronous groups, the typical time span is ninety minutes with approximately forty to forty-five questions used during the discussion (question dialogues typically run about two minutes per question). Asynchronous groups vary depending on the number of days the group will last and the nature of the questions. Participants consider and respond to a new set of questions each morning. An advantage of asynchronous groups is that participants can spend more time responding to questions and reading comment threads than what is possible for participants in a synchronous group.

Although skeptics feel that much is lost in interpersonal interaction online, those skilled in online relationships will recognize that personalities and attitudes can easily be relayed online and relationships do develop among participants. Many who are willing to participate in online focus groups have previously participated in chat rooms and on message boards. Consequently, it is not difficult for participants to establish a rapport with one another. Moderators sometimes struggle to establish authority in online groups, and there are other drawbacks like the lack of security (particularly given the inability to confirm identities of participants), the minimal client involvement, and the inability to use tangible stimuli. Overall, though, online focus groups represent a temporary form of social community, and therefore offer an appropriate and powerful research tool for studying consumer reactions to social-media advertising.

Netnography

Robert Kozinets defines netnography as a “qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications.”⁵ The approach uses information available through online forums such as chat rooms, message boards, and social-networking groups to study the attitudes and behaviors of the market

involved. It is an unobtrusive approach to research with a key benefit of observing what is likely to be credible information, unaffected by the research process. Many marketers already use a very informal and unsystematic form of netnography by simply exploring relevant online communities. However, to minimize the limitations of netnography, researchers should be careful in their evaluations, by employing triangulation to confirm findings whenever possible.

How can we use netnography? Kozinets recommends the following steps:⁶

- Identify online venues that could provide information related to the research questions.
- Select online communities that are focused on a particular topic or segment, have a high “traffic” of postings, have a relatively large number of active posters, and appear to have detailed posts.
- Learn about the group’s culture, including its characteristics, behaviors, and language.
- Select material for analysis and classify material as social or informational and off-topic or on-topic.
- Categorize the types of participants involved in the discussions to be analyzed. There are four key categories of participants (this grouping is useful for reducing the data to be considered): (1) tourists, (2) minglers, (3) devotees, and (4) insiders. Tourists are casual visitors, while minglers are there for social needs. Devotees and insiders are the two groups with a strong interest in the topic, and it is their responses that should be the focus of analysis.
- Keep a journal of observations and reflections about the data collection and analysis process.
- Be straightforward with those in the online community about your purpose for participation by fully disclosing the researcher’s presence in the community as well as his or her intent.
- Utilize “member checks,” following content analysis of the discourse to ensure that members feel their attitudes and behaviors have been accurately interpreted.

Ultimately, online research is a valuable tool for advertisers operating in a virtual realm—not only because of clear efficiency advantages like cost, speed, and access but also because of the parallels in the online environment. When the insight from online primary research is combined with success metrics and content analysis, it provides a strong foundation to refine future strategies.