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Using Social Media to Listen to Consumers

A Vocal Few Don't Represent the Majority but Could Signify a Larger Issue

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- If the social-media sphere attacks your brand, do "real people" hear the screams? Not likely, according to surveys that indicate marketers shouldn't rush to quiet every micro-outrage that sweeps across the web.

Last fall, Johnson & Johnson's Motrin broke creative of a mom complaining that wearing your baby "in fashion," via a sling, can cause back and neck pain. It offended some in the social-media sphere, and an army of Twittering moms got the brand to yank the ad and issue a mea culpa on its site. But, according to a Lightspeed Research survey, almost 90% of women had never seen the ad. Once they saw it, about 45% liked the video, 41% had no feelings about it, and 15% didn't like it. Even fewer, 8%, said it negatively affected their feelings of the brand, compared with the 32% who said it made them like the brand more. Was Motrin's decision to yank the ad and apologize the right one -- even if it made the problem go away?

Skittles recently redesigned its website and adopted a sort of "anti-site." Instead of building a destination, it built an overlay that sat atop several social-media communities: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia. It launched debate -- and mischief -- in the Twitterverse as users started posting sometimes-naughty comments about the candy to the social-media sites. But when private online community Communispace asked more than 300 people if they'd heard of the endeavor, only 6% of a fairly web-savvy audience had.

The internet has made it easier than ever for consumers to get their opinions heard -- and for marketers to listen. But it also creates real challenges: Do marketers know who they're listening to? And at what point does the echo chamber of social media drown out the real opinions of the people who buy your brand?

"The data is a really compelling reminder that a lot of our target consumers are not the people who are sitting on

Twitter freaking out over a packaging design that they don't like," said Diane Hessian, CEO of Communispace. She added, "These are people online, having conversations, and yet they are totally out of the loop on stuff us marketing junkies love to obsess over."

Out of the loop

For example, in the past month, the Twitter community has been titillated by South by Southwest, AT&T, "Lost" and the redesign of Skittles.com. Missing from the list are things the Communispace and Lightspeed surveys, both separately commissioned on Ad Age's behalf, found that the general population is fired up about, such as the AIG bonuses and the bank-bailout plans.

There's also the straight numbers game: While 64% of Communispace respondents had heard of Twitter, only 6% used it. The Lightspeed responses indicated even fewer users had heard of it (3%), and most of the 58% who had knew of it from someone they know or -- get this -- TV.

At the time of the Motrin move, Ad Age, per Alexa, reported that only about 0.15% of the world's internet users were on the site, meaning, by the most generous estimate, about 1.1 million Americans. Communispace found that the more emotional responses were about the firestorm and how Johnson & Johnson had responded, not about the actual ad.

Of course, it's never a good idea to tick off even a small group of vocal consumers. But the recent data just reinforce that marketers are "downright jittery," Ms. Hessian said. "To some extent they have lost confidence in the thoughtful decisions they've made because an anonymous person can get on some new social-media tool and raise questions about quality of decisions."

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It's not that marketers shouldn't listen and respond to what people are saying about them on the web. Many a company has been improved by responding to vocal online pundits.

Look who's talking

But the surveys do suggest that companies should make sure they know who they're listening to. "Marketers need to know how active their customers are on social technologies," said Josh Bernoff, VP-principal analyst at Forrester Research.

Ed Keller, CEO of Keller Fay Group, said his research suggests as much as half of online word-of-mouth impressions are generated by teenagers; that means an online uproar might mean more for Facebook than it does for Motrin.

While online criticism may not be cause to act, it can provide companies insight into passionate bases they didn't know they had.

"Listening doesn't mean getting one small piece of data and taking action," Ms. Hessian said. "Sometimes it means getting a piece of data and probing further."

How to listen and respond more effectively

KNOW YOUR CONSUMERS' SOCIAL-MEDIA HABITS.

"What you see is not necessarily representative of people using the social technologies, but the people using those social technologies and like to talk," said Forrester's Josh Bernoff.

HAVE A RESPONSE MECHANISM IN PLACE. Don't wait until you have vocal critics to design a response plan. Rather than pulling its ad and issuing an apology on its site that confused the 90% of people who weren't aware of the criticism, Motrin could have engaged the angry mob.

LOOK FOR CHANGES IN CHATTER. If suddenly the conversation doubles, or if people start talking about your brand in a way they weren't the day before, something important is happening. "Changes in attitudes are more significant about attitudes themselves," Mr. Bernoff said.

PINPOINT PASSION. Your critics can provide you with insight into a base you didn't know existed. Who, for example, were these "attachment parenting" moms so outraged by Motrin? Not all criticism is cause for action, CommuniSpace's Diane Hessian said. But it is cause to dig deeper.