

SOCIAL MEDIA AND BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

BY JEFFREY PEEL OF QUADRIGA CONSULTING LTD

I hardly need to define social media – most readers will use one or more of the social media platforms in their business or personal life. And social media does tend to bifurcate into the worlds of business or personal life – although there is considerable overlap. The key point to bear in mind about these technologies is that they afford an opportunity to identify people who have mutual or common interests – and that’s of interest to market researchers. However, social media also provides us with a new toolkit too. Social media, after all, is easily available to be viewed and to be used. It’s both active and passive.



The extent to which social media is of interest to us in the B2B research space very much depends on what we want to do. For qualitative research the social media sites present us with people who are essentially pre-screened before the recruitment process takes place. For quantitative research we have readily available quotas. Or so you might be led to believe. The actuality is somewhat more complicated. But more strategically – the consequences of social media, or Web 2.0, is more fundamental than how we use social media sites as sample frames. Web 2.0 is utterly transforming, to the core, in how we conduct research. But I’ll come back to that later.

The social media owners are becoming increasingly aware that they have rich assets – and they have no intention of making it too easy for marketers and researchers to exploit the assets without paying. To an extent it has to be that way. If social media users suddenly find themselves bombarded with survey participation requests they will leave in droves.

Facebook – the gorilla of the social media industry – demonstrated their upcoming research capabilities at the World Economic Forum in Davos last year. Although since then there has been precious little from the company on the topic. The company is more likely to make hay in the MR space by opening up its platform to paying MR guests.

Because, when one thinks about it, these huge social media sites are the ultimate sample frame. Many argue that given Facebook’s size and its volume of users – literally hundreds of millions of people across the globe – it is beginning to define a new marketing taxonomy.

However, this is all very well for consumer markets, but what about B2B?

Well the good thing is that as B2B researchers most of the quantitative work we undertake is purposive – quota controlled sampling focused on a particular business interest group. Facebook and the other consumer social media sites are of somewhat limited use because they are built from the ground up on the shoulders of individuals rather than companies. Often we are required by clients to build a perspective of corporate decision making based on interviewing “decision maker contacts”. Facebook doesn’t make that especially easy. Although business social media sites like LinkedIn can be more useful in this respect.

As researchers we need to pay due regard to protocol. Social media owners do not permit unsolicited contact. Therefore in order to make overtures to potential respondents requires us to work within the system. I find that the most useful way to engage the social media sites and the rich data they hold, and their fabulous membership bases, is to build a separate social media asset with clear links into social media sites. But this represents a whole new paradigm for many research organisations.

Increasingly the blog is the key. Think of the blog as a relationship conduit between the client organisation and people with whom the client organisation wishes to engage. If the eCommerce site is the transactional front end of the B2B brand, the blog is the means by which the brand can establish other types of relationship – with customers, prospects, channels and even competitor customers. And the blog can be fully integrated with social media sites that can feed new potential relationships.

Now the reason that this is a whole new paradigm is that building a blog is a long term investment. There is little point building a blog for a tactical research assignment and then closing it. Increasingly, blogs – for organisations that do them well – are the means by which they tap into the market consciousness. As researchers, we need to be right in the middle of building these assets, conducting continuous qualitative research based on them, and using the registration database arising from them as the ultimate ‘engaged’ respondent sample frame for ad hoc research.

That’s not to suggest that there is no role for social media in ad hoc B2B research. Far from it. Social media sites can act as wonderful recruitment sites for research. I have made extensive use of advertising on Facebook to engage respondents in “on-blog” quantitative surveys. However, I have also used more ‘traditional’ search engine advertising to achieve the same result. In that respect social media sites are like any other with large visitor populations – they can be a useful means of identifying people that might be of interest to us – without having to undertake extensive and expensive telephone screening.

But let’s turn the discussion 180 degrees and ask how social media can help us as researchers i.e. in using some of the social media tools to help with the research process. Social media is not merely Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. Social media illustrates the new web phenomenon – the web as a platform rather than a ‘tell sell’.

Web 2.0 – that awful term that tries to convey the idea of interactive, social technologies – gives us a chance to engage with people in ways that were not that easy in the past.

Every research project I conduct these days has web 2.0 elements. And I'm not just talking Survey Monkey here.



Google docs is a free collaborative document environment created by Google that allows us to create documents instantly that can be shared. Forms can easily be embedded into web pages. Video can be created simply – using products like Jing or Slideshare. Blogs can be put up in minutes.

Therefore a whole new world of possibilities opens up to us as researchers.

Product concepts can be explained very easily via multimedia.

Interviewers – who might be distributed over the world – can complete survey responses simply and easily and responses returned to a central database that can be shared by members of the project team. Qualitative research interest groups can be created in minutes using sites such as Wordpress.com. Focus groups can be shared instantly via web streaming utilities like Qik and audiences can participate in real time using Twitter.

In short social media is not merely Facebook or Twitter. Rather it's a whole new way of thinking about the web that allows people to talk. The challenge is to use our imaginations to allow it create whole new ways participation. We're researchers – social media is what we've been waiting for!

Jeffrey Peel is Managing Director of Quadriga Consulting Ltd www.quadco.co.uk