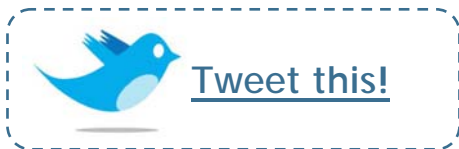




The New Era of Online Listening

A look at how marketers are tapping web-based conversations and behaviors to derive powerful insights that can inform brand strategy.



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Introduction

In the past few years, the practice of online listening (also called buzz monitoring or social media monitoring) has gone from an obscure research concept to a rapidly growing and bona fide research methodology, adopted by many Fortune 500 clients across industry verticals. But, with such rapid growth and with the proliferation of companies offering listening services ranging from fully automated solutions to manual, human-powered analyses of online conversations, what is the right model for incorporating online listening into your research approach? What is listening best used for? How often should it be used? Most importantly, what decisions does it help drive?

To help sort out these questions, we have outlined what we consider the most important considerations for listening, and how to approach setting up a listening program that is both efficient and customized to the needs of your brands and your business.

The New Era of Online Listening

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ONLINE LISTENING OBJECTIVES

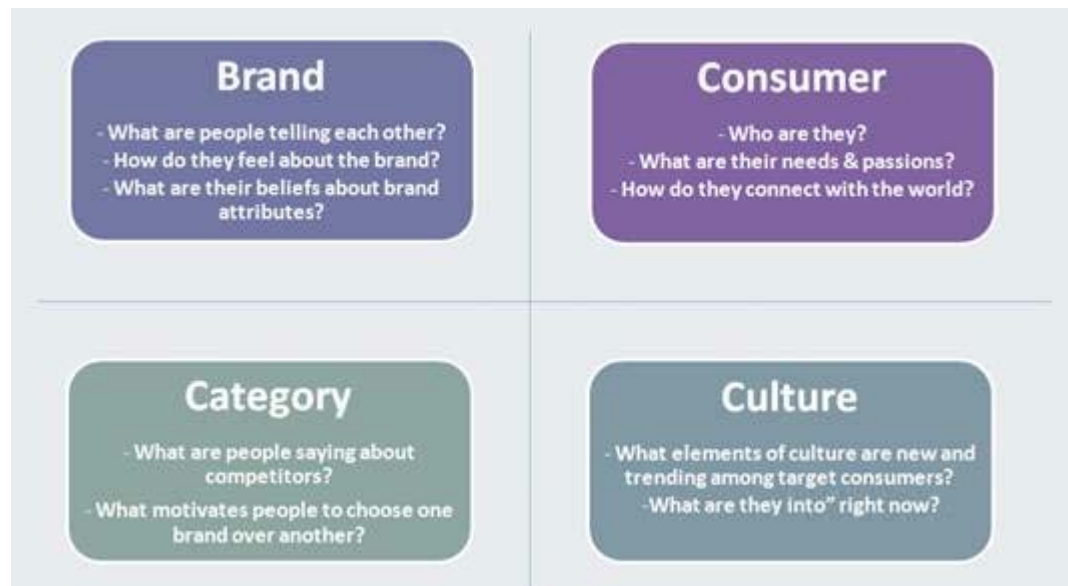
It is critically important to clearly define what you want to get out of your listening program and what decisions it will ultimately impact. Not all marketing/consumer questions can be answered through listening (see section below called “What Listening is NOT good for”). But knowing the questions you want to answer at the start of the program will allow you to correctly structure the program and analyze the right set of conversations at the right times. The outcome of your listening exercise is entirely dependent on the questions you pose up front.

For instance, asking the question “What are people saying about my brand?” will yield high level insights about general topics of discussion, sentiment and brand attributes. This may be important on a brand health level to track once or twice per year, depending on how active your brand is in marketing throughout the period. But questions such as “How is consumer segment x responding to my new messaging strategy?”, or “What are relevant trends among 18-24 year old males?” will yield an entirely different analysis on different sub-sets of conversations. These types of highly focused analyses may be conducted more frequently to address questions throughout the year on individual programs, events or initiatives as they occur.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS LISTENING CAN ANSWER

Listening doesn't simply help you understand “what people are saying”; it can add dimension and deep, real-time insights into multiple aspects that directly impact strategic marketing development. It can be a highly effective, less costly and more real-time alternative to traditional research tools such as focus groups, in depth interviews, surveys and segmentation analysis. Listening is an efficient way to track ongoing brand health or gain access to on-the-fly marketing and messaging feedback, straight from consumer mouths. It can be tapped into to track and identify unmet needs for product development ideation, or to spot emerging cultural trends before they become mainstream.

We can categorize types of online listening analyses loosely into four categories of insights: Brand, Category, Consumer and Culture.



BALANCING TECHNOLOGICAL VS. PEOPLE-BASED ANALYSIS

Before we get into approaches for the four types of Insights identified above, it is worth discussing the best use of automated tools vs. human-powered analysis. While both are important, the real insights are derived via human analysis.

Although listening technology platforms such as Radian6 and Sysomos make it possible to quickly identify and aggregate public conversations across many online platforms, they only provide the data, not the meaning. Many of the tools in the market do strive to organize the data by category and sentiment, for example, using NLP (natural language processing) technology; however, there is simply no substitute for human-based analysis once the data is collected. There is no technology currently available that can interpret the subtleties of the human language and understand sarcasm, misspellings and colloquialisms with an acceptable degree of accuracy. It is the human analytical layer that provides the meaning behind the buzz, and very importantly, organizes it in a way that addresses the questions and objectives set out at the start.

THE FOUR CATEGORIES OF LISTENING-BASED INSIGHTS

Brand

One of the most common uses of listening is evaluating and tracking what consumers are telling each other about a brand. Now more than ever, brands are in the hands of consumers. Because 60% of people are at least somewhat likely to take action when a friend posts something about a product, service, company or brand on a social media site (source: ROI Research), it's critical to track what is being said about your brand in order to identify opportunities, refine communications, or respond quickly to emerging areas of concern.

Core listening measurements on a brand include conversation category breakdown, platform analysis (where conversations are occurring) and basic sentiment evaluation. Depending on objectives, there are many additional ways to dig deeper into the underlying trends. For example, uncovering the layers of emotional expression beyond positive, negative and neutral – how do consumers express emotion when talking about the brand? When expressing favorability or negativity, what language do they use? Do they joke, use sarcasm or strong language? The tone and types of expression used organically by consumers can have direct implications for how to talk to them within branded communities such as Facebook or even within more formal advertising communications.

Another way to understand conversation trends is to analyze what brand attributes consumers ascribe to the brand based on their conversations, either explicitly or implicitly. By mapping out the brand beliefs that consumers convey through their language, you will get a sense of where your brand plays strongly in their minds. This can directly impact not only the brand attributes to reinforce via marketing initiatives, but also help identify opportunities for growth and evolution.

Category

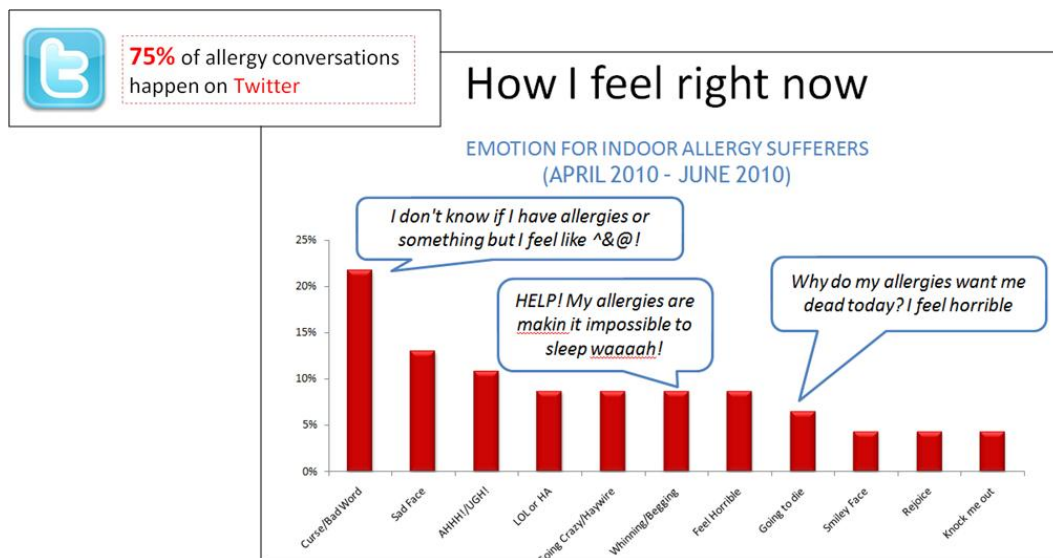
Consumers don't talk about individual brands in silos. Brands exist within larger ecosystems of competing products and companies clamoring for attention. Online listening can paint this picture of the greater digital/social environment, and how specific brands fit, by providing insights into competitors, the industry, or the category as a whole.

Competitive benchmarking is one way to map category norms online to understand where your brand stands. Comparing metrics such as share of

buzz, sources of conversation, or areas of favorability, across a competitive set provides valuable context. For instance, what does 40% positive sentiment really mean? Is that high? This exercise often reveals gaps and opportunities with strategic implications. As an example, if analysis reveals that one competitor has a disproportionate amount of positive buzz on Twitter, it would be helpful to evaluate this brand's Twitter strategy and uncover exactly what it is that consumers are responding to.

While category level listening often focuses on competitive brands, it can also provide valuable insight into what is being said on a broader industry basis ("mouthwash", rather than "Listerine"). This can be helpful in a few ways:

1. **Measuring the scope of the opportunity:** What percentage of relevant conversations is currently branded vs. unbranded? Analyzing this will help gauge the size of the opportunity for brands to become an increasingly integrated part of the conversation. If the category is not very "talk-able" the opportunity may appear relatively limited. If this is the case, one strategy is to find ways to borrow relevance from a category that is **already** well discussed and relate it to your brand. For instance, Charmin toilet paper noticed that while people didn't discuss toilet paper, they did discuss public bathrooms. So they created an app that provides advice on the "best" public bathroom options based on a user's location.
2. **Understanding product-relevant behaviors and motivations:** Consumers discuss their needs and motivations all the time through their social outlets without realizing it. Using what they say about *what* they need and how they *feel* about their experiences, we can discover emotional and rational drivers that lead them to make one product choice over another. This analysis helps to refine what messaging will resonate well among target consumers. For example, when we analyzed discussions on the category of seasonal allergies, we found that consumers generally didn't get into long, involved stories about their allergies; instead they focused heavily on instant status updates and letting people know how miserable they are *at that moment*. They wanted someone to listen and provide solutions on how to make them feel better as fast as possible. Thus we recommended a social media strategy that listens to sufferers in real time and responds with helpful tips and advice on the fly.



Understanding category level behaviors / Source: 360i analysis

- Category trends:** Listening can also be predictive. By keeping tabs on specific product areas, we can start to uncover category trends and capitalize on them in real time. As an example, we conduct listening for a large retail client by monitoring apparel clothing discussions in order to identify emerging trends in retail fashion among a specific set of fashion influencers. This sort of analysis provides immediate fodder for talking to consumers within branded online communities (e.g. Facebook), asset creation, advertising content, and merchandising decisions.

Consumer

Going beyond what is being said about a brand or category, we can also look deeper into the actual person having these conversations in order to develop personas or identify tribes. Who are they apart from being “a consumer?” How do they describe themselves? What are their hobbies, interests, and passions? Daily challenges and life goals? Painting a fuller picture of your online audiences brings them to life and helps you discover how to tap into multiple facets and passion points.

One way to do this is to analyze users’ personal bios or “about me” sections on blogs or Twitter, hobbies/activities on Facebook, as well as the types of content they tend to write about. Even the images in blog or Twitter backgrounds on personal feeds can reveal a window into a user’s personality. By doing so a fuller picture of the daily lives of target consumers can be painted, including what roles they play (student, mother, entrepreneur, etc.) and the passions they pursue. By cross-referencing multiple sources of public information, profiles can be constructed and grouped into behavioral or psychographic “tribes”.

This analysis helps marketers tap deeper into consumers' psyche and generate ideas that both excite and engage the relevant tribe. For instance, in the example below this brand may want to develop different types of content to engage avid Foodies vs. people in the Music tribe.



Tribe Analysis / Source: 360i analysis of the social media landscape

Culture (Trend Spotting)

Social media sits at the crossroads of culture and consumers. It's never been easier to understand cultural trends at scale and in near real time.

The most direct way to spot a cultural trend is to listen to what topics of conversation a particular consumer segment is talking about. The challenge of trend spotting is that trends can be fleeting; and, once you spot one, it may be too late. It takes some initial hypothesizing, keen intuition and guesswork to truly spot a tipping point.

It may seem counterintuitive, but to spot a mass trend early on, it pays to start small. Identify cultural areas to focus on – music, cooking, sports, etc., and listen to what the target audience is saying regarding those topics. Trends – the ones that stick – often start from the bottom-up, meaning they come from everyday consumers, not necessarily celebrities. Online listening allows real time access to organic, unedited conversations, making it an ideal tool for spotting and tracking the genesis of these trends.

While bottom-up trend spotting is good for forecasting cultural insight early on, top-down influence – understanding how those with online authority are

leading culture – is a powerful way to keep in touch with pop culture trends that already appeal to wider audiences.

There are many ways to define influence. This topic has been a [point of contention](#) among marketers, with companies like [Klout](#) creating their own special algorithm to define online authority. Usually influencer evaluation uses some combination of audience size (reach or followers), engagement of that audience (using measures like comment activity), and inbound links.

Once a segment of influencers has been defined and identified, ongoing listening will help to track and filter through topics of conversation. If a certain topic of conversation is trending among influencers, that interest may trickle down to the masses (their readers and followers).



Tracking Trends / Source: 360i analysis

WHAT LISTENING IS NOT GOOD FOR

Listening to what people are saying online is an important tool for tapping into the consumer psyche but, as with any type of consumer research, it can't address all marketer questions. The more integration there is with other approaches to research, the deeper you can dig down into trends, motivations and behaviors of consumers.

Below are a handful of common topics that can be answered by using methodologies in addition to online listening.

Emotional Triggers

While online listening is good for understanding consumer sentiment around a particular topic or brand, it can sometimes be difficult to decipher the ‘why’ behind their sentiment, especially given the popularity of short-form status updates (e.g. Twitter). For example, a consumer might say “I love Coca-Cola”, but unfortunately they don’t often provide more detail as to why they love the brand or product.

There are several ways to supplement online listening and gain deeper insights on emotional connection. One is to simply ask them, whether it’s through an opt-in survey or, even better, a more in-depth qualitative interview.

Another is ethnographic research. This can mean any type of investigation where you observe first-hand how consumers use your products, and the role your brand plays in their lives. This doesn’t have to be a time-consuming and expensive process. A quick and efficient way to conduct ethnography, for example, is to visit the point of purchase (whether in an offline store or online site), observe, ask questions and probe. Another inexpensive tactic for ethnographic research is to reach out to personal networks and find someone who fits the target you’re looking for. Ask to come into their homes, or to tag along while they shop / consume your product. Never underestimate the power of talking to your consumer directly and observing them in their own natural environment.

Consumer Pathing

Another area where online listening alone can fall short is when trying to understand the path to purchase. It’s often difficult to see the full picture of how consumers move through the funnel from awareness to research and finally to purchase, as well as the general order of events and how the use of various channels (online/offline/mobile) interrelate.

In depth-interviews and ethnography are both great tools for understanding this process in its entirety. By asking the right questions you can identify and understand the stages of this process and most importantly, which areas you can impact. As digital becomes more influential in consumers’ decision, we need to figure out what roles different types of media play in the process – search, website, in-store experience. Part of this process is also understanding the consumers’ state of mind at each stage, which allows us to tailor how we communicate to them at each phase.

Conclusion

A good listening program is tailored in terms of depth, frequency, and topical analysis, and then evolved over time. A generic, templated listening exercise will generate limited benefit. Thus it is important to enlist all stakeholders who will benefit from the outcome in articulating objectives upfront, and also ensure that they are empowered to act upon the results.

As a review, here are some example strategic questions that listening can be employed to address:

- Brand: What is image of my brand in consumers' minds *right now*? How can I evolve the conversation through active participation?
- Category: How do people compare my brand with competitors, and how can we capitalize on areas of favorability to strengthen our position in the market?
- Consumer: What are my consumers' interests and hobbies? How can we use what we know about their passions to make my brand more relatable and relevant?
- Culture: What are emerging trends among my core consumer? What celebrities, bands, dance moves, art forms, TV shows, mixed drinks, cultural memes, etc. are beginning to cause murmurs of buzz, and when will it reach a tipping point? How can I tap into the conversation in an organic way before it becomes mainstream?

Given all the considerations that go into a designing a good listening program, it's extremely important to formulate a custom approach on a brand-by-brand basis. The first step is understanding the full scope of what listening can do, and where other types of research may support or supplement. Thus equipped, you can make listening a powerful tool in your marketing arsenal, connecting you to the world's largest focus group and the uninhibited thoughts of people everywhere.

ABOUT 360i

360i is an award-winning digital marketing agency that drives results for Fortune 500 marketers through insights, ideas and technologies. 360i helps its clients think differently about their online presence and evolve their strategies to take advantage of the new world of marketing communications – one where brands and consumers engage in interactive and multi-directional conversations. In 2010, Ad Age named 360i to its prestigious Agency A-List. Current clients include Oreo, jcpenny, Coca-Cola, NBC Universal, Capital One and Diageo, among others. For more information, please visit blog.360i.com or follow us on Twitter @[360i](https://twitter.com/360i).

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