

## **Linking web buzz to Mini sales**

*Michael Bush*

How MotiveQuest helped automaker keep online advocates talking

The 2002 U.S. debut of Mini, a flashy, toy-like car in the land of the oversize SUV, generated enough media coverage and consumer interest that the brand maintained significant buzz for nearly four years.

But the buzz began to dissipate in 2006, leaving Trudy Hardy, manager of Mini marketing, and her team with the challenge of finding a way to keep the brand relevant and the chatter alive. And while Mini was basically offering the same car it did the year before, a number of competitors were generating their own buzz by entering the small-car segment and rolling out hybrids.

Enter the consultancy MotiveQuest and its new metric, the Online Promoter Score, developed alongside researchers at Northwestern University. According to MotiveQuest, the Online Promoter Score can correlate the relationship between marketing and online brand advocacy to sales by measuring the net frequency of people recommending a brand online. A 16-month test of the metric helped the automaker discover the connection between online buzz and retail traffic and helped Mini revamp its media-relations philosophy.

Since MotiveQuest launched in 2003, it has been gaining ground in the crowded online brand-monitoring space populated by rivals such as Nielsen Buzzmetrics and Cymfony. The notion of listening to consumers talk about brands is growing in currency, especially as the internet provides more and more ways to facilitate conversation.

MotiveQuest works with a list of marketers that includes Citibank and Nike in addition to BMW Mini.

Mini turned to MotiveQuest for help getting back its mojo. "When we launched we really relied on the power of buzz marketing and editorial to help us," Ms. Hardy said. "As buzz started to die down, we needed to figure out how to stay top of mind, and not just by using print and TV ads. We were always talking about creating brand ambassadors and how they could carry the conversation for us."

Then there was the question of whether it could measure the effectiveness of brand ambassadors and online buzz.

In 2006 Mini was getting ready for the launch of a new model and a cross-country promotional event called Mini Takes the States. MotiveQuest, which charges anywhere from \$30,000 to \$75,000 for six-to-eight-week projects, suggested measuring automotive conversations online centering on Mini and a group of 15 competitors, including Volkswagen Jetta and Toyota Scion, before, during and after the event. Mini had always monitored its online advertising efforts, but watching online conversations about its brand was a first for the company.

Mini and MotiveQuest collected data from nearly 30 million online conversations about the Mini brand and its competitors on blogs, social networks; and sites such as Autobytel, Yahoo Autos and MSN Autos from January 2006 until April 2007. Nearly half a million of those conversations, which involved 52,000 people were Mini-specific. "From all of those conversations, we found that Mini owners were not only talking about things like performance and handling but community type things like picture sharing, getting together at events and personal etiquette-the Mini way," said David Rabjohns, CEO of MotiveQuest.

Mr. Rabjohns said analysis of the data showed that Mini indexed higher than other brands when it came to talking about community-oriented topics. As a result, the automaker has been engaging the Mini community more in 2008, so far as having them assist in marketing and special events. Among its competitors, it also had the highest "net sentiment," which measures

usage of words such as "love," "recommend" and "best" in connection with a brand name. It also generated more online discussion than any competitor except Jetta.

Ms. Hardy said the results also prompted Mini to take a different approach to online partners and prominent bloggers. "We treat bloggers like press [now]," she said. "We'll invite them to test-drive cars first and have asked one to be the official podcaster of our events."

The results also showed that non-Mini owners are also interested in the brand. "We monitored sites where people were shopping and asking questions about Mini or other owners so that let us know there were new people curious about the brand," Ms. Hardy said.

But the bottom line is selling cars. And while Ms. Hardy said the metric doesn't "tie back directly" to sales, it correlates web traffic and online conversations to actual retail traffic.

"So we definitely see some correlation between online activity and how that affects showroom traffic," she said. "We look at the spikes that are going on in conversations and see if it measures against an increased amount of traffic to our site, which ultimately leads to an increased amount of leads we send to our dealers."

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