

Footprints and fingerprints

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Environmentalists frequently remind us about our carbon footprint. Just as important, however, is our digital footprint, which represents a business opportunity, once it is fully understood.

Tony Fish, a serially successful entrepreneur, understands this. He advises media agencies on their digital strategy and has written a book on the subject, *My Digital Footprint*.

He is fully aware that everything we do on the internet is observed and recorded, both by the powers that be and those seeking financial gain from understanding our behaviour. Our footprint includes the websites we look at, our online purchases, the content we create and the online conversations we have via e-mail or on social networking sites.

This is the natural outcome of using most of these services for free and, while we may have concerns about privacy and civil liberties, it must be acknowledged that we largely give these up as soon as we log in.

Those of us with long digital memories remember that the internet was originally funded by a US Department of Defense project. This enabled Unix machines to operate in an intelligent network that could deliver messages if a site was to come under nuclear attack. A by-product of this was "big brother" being able to intercept all the e-mails if he wished.

Such privacy concerns are of little concern to younger people, who have grown up with a ubiquitous and nearly free internet. They will happily or unwittingly generate a significant amount of personal data as a by-product of their daily interactions. This process has been accelerated and enhanced by smart phones that add location-based, real-time data to extend significantly the user's digital footprint.

However, Fish argues that raw data about web users is of little value unless it is put into context. It is not so much what you might be doing, or saying, but who you are doing it with – the interactions and conversations you are having online. For example, the fact that you have just bought a new car is of minimal interest on its own. While you might be interested in cars, you have just bought one and are, therefore, not likely to be in the market for one soon.

But if you are going online and telling everyone how wonderful the car is, and how great the service you received was, this is of value – especially to the car dealer and other relevant suppliers, who can identify your long-term value from measuring your digital footprint.

In the future, those of us with the largest digital footprints will be the most valued consumers. Fish predicts that soon we will all have two online identities: a personal one tailored for consumer benefits and a business one for a different level of transaction.

He concludes that the ability to understand the value of online conversations is an opportunity, as nobody owns the space. Entrepreneurs should, therefore, gather and analyse data, and concentrate on developing online relationships that can help them tailor products and services to customers' needs.

But online conversations are also a threat to businesses. Their expensively developed brands can potentially be destroyed overnight by the online chatter of customers with large digital footprints. This is why wise brand owners monitor Twitter and other platforms – and take appropriate action.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, Feb. 5th 2010, Entrepreneurship, online.