

Stop asking questions and start listening

As 'we' research models reveal a deeper understanding of the needs, concerns and desires of consumers, social media is becoming an essential tool for listening to communities from the inside

By Ray Poynter, *The Future Place*

The process of understanding consumers, a process than can be loosely described as market research, is going through a period of both evolution and revolution.

The evolution is a shift from representative samples of people, interviewed via clipboards and telephones, towards online surveys conducted with pre-recruited panels of members doing 50 or more surveys a year, towards integrated databases where CRM and research are blurring into holistic feedback systems.

However, it is the revolution that is grabbing more interest and which threatens to reshape the relationship between marketers and consumers. The revolution is best described as being a shift away from asking questions towards listening. This shift is most pronounced in the area of social media but is also finding expression in the way that many brand managers and even board directors are spending time 'hanging out' with customers - and is beginning to create a shift from 'me'-research to 'we'-research.

The move from 'asking' to 'listening' is being driven by a recognition that the old ways of finding things out are not providing the depth of understanding that brands and marketers need. Coca-Cola's Stan Sthanunathan, chair of the Advertising Research Foundation's Online Research Quality

Council, who also writes in this *Admap* issue, put his finger on the problem when he said: "We're too focused on understanding consumption behaviour and shopping behaviour. We need to understand the human condition, which you'll only know by observing, listening, synthesising and deducing." Asking questions and collecting answers are all well and good, but they do not get to the root of what 21st Century marketing requires.

"Why ask some of us when you can listen to all of us?" was an early cry from the evangelists of blog and buzz mining. Their argument was that the answers to traditional research questions were artificial, lacking in depth, and simply represented the marketer's agenda. By contrast, blog and buzz mining appeared to offer the chance to listen to real people, having real conversations, about the issues that really mattered to them. The truth has proved to be somewhat more nuanced,

but the essential point that listening to people is essential has proved indisputable.

Dutch broadcaster RTL Nederlands and its innovative agency, Insites Consulting, illustrated the power of mining the buzz at a recent ESOMAR event in Chicago.

The project was centred on the Dutch version of the widely popular TV programme *X Factor*. Because the *X Factor* lasts several weeks, from auditions, to boot camp, to the knockout rounds, the show is particularly suitable for an iterative research process. In this case, the iterative research used searching and web scraping online conversations about the show.

During the project, over 71,000 comments were captured from a variety of Dutch language online communities. In a version of online ethnography or discourse analysis, Insites Consulting analysed what people were saying about the show, its contestants, the

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songs, and the way that the show was shaping up. RTL Nederlands was able to use this information to make week-by-week alterations to the show and the accompanying website to make the show sharper and increase the interest of the viewing public.

The show was broadcast on Fridays, so the agency did its web scraping on Mondays, reporting back to RTL on Wednesdays, which allowed the information to impact the show on the Friday. More information about this study, and a similar study for the show *So You Think You Can Dance?*, can be found at www.insites.eu.

Blog and buzz mining can be used at a more generic level, to explore the human condition, as opposed to the specifics of a product or service. A good example of this sort of project was the CREEN project. This was an EU-funded endeavour, which explored whether blog and buzz mining could provide early indicators of concerns about the public's trust in science. The project ran from 2005 to 2008, with the Statistical Cybermetrics Research Group at the University of Wolverhampton at the centre of the project.

To seek out early indicators of public concern, the project chose 100,000 blogs to monitor, then fed the output of these blogs into a large database, which was searched and queried. The key element of the searches was to find and count the number of posts, in a specific time period, that contained both a science-related word (for example, science or scientist) and a fear-related word (such as fear or worry).

Over time, the project was able to plot the rise and fall of science related concerns, enabling the researchers to query the spikes to see what the blogs were actually saying. Examples of spikes that occurred during the project included 'stem' (associated with stem cell research) and 'Schiavo' (relating to the turning off, in the US, of Terri Schiavo's life support machine).

Netnography is a new branch of ethnography devoted to the internet in general and social media in particular. The term has

MROC CASE STUDY: EASYJET COMMUNITY



EasyJet has been using an MROC since 2008 to provide a cost-effective method of connecting with its customers. Among the reasons the airline used an MROC were to create an open, two-way communication between customers and company, and a long-term-plan to co-create.

The EasyJet community comprises around 2,000 customers in a community facilitated by Virtual Surveys. Participants are

invited to take part in one or two projects or discussions a week. The projects include advertising, network development, customer experience and strategy.

EasyJet was able to conduct more research, for more areas of the business and in a faster timeframe, but within the same budgetary constraints. It has become the blueprint for EasyJet customer interaction and research.

been popularised by Robert Kozinets, and his book, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, is recommended to anybody wanting a grounding in the topic.

Blog and buzz mining attempt to distil truth by gathering large amounts of text and using sophisticated software to understand it. By contrast, netnography distils its truths through the intensive analysis of more human-scale amounts of data.

In a netnographical investigation, the researcher focuses on a particular community or site and analyses the posts and interactions. It should be noted that the material the netnographer works with include posts, comments, images, videos and tags. Sometimes the netnographer restricts their role to that of the observer, but often the netnographer uses a

participant/observer model, engaging the community or site members in discussion or other interactions. Kozinets argues that it is usually necessary for the researcher to be a participant/observer, interacting with community members, to be able to properly understand the communication taking place.

A good example of market-related netnography is provided by a study conducted by Steve August, chief executive of US online software provider Revelation. August used netnographical approaches to investigate online communities' views of digital cameras, starting by listening, and proceeding on to the role of participant observer, gaining an insight into the language and views of the community members. August ran a parallel study using conventional qualitative approaches and

was able to conclude that netnographical, listening-based techniques were every bit as effective as conventional approaches.

The major limitation of passive research, both blog and buzz mining and netnography, is that most of the time, most people are not talking about the subjects that the brand needs to know about today. If your brand is Toyota and you want to know about issues around accelerator pedals, or if you are the *X Factor* and you want to know about the contestants, cyberspace will be full of relevant discussions and comments. Sometimes it will be sufficiently useful to re-scope the research to look at the field, rather than the brand, so, instead of looking at a specific brand of beer, to look at beer drinking, indeed to look at drinking occasions, drivers and consequences.

However, on many occasions the brands will have specific needs. For example, a brand may want to know whether to launch a line extension, or whether ad A is better than ad B, or to understand why people are not buying brand C. In these situations, the researcher has to be more active, helping to create conversations that will facilitate listening.

Some long-standing research approaches have always employed the method of creating discussions and then listening, for example focus groups. However, more recently, a greater range of approaches have become available, with MROCs and We-Research being two of the most interesting.

HARNESSING THE NEW WEB

Market research online communities (MROCs) are communities created specifically to allow brands and organisations to create conversations, to research topics, and to use a listening metaphor. MROCs are quite distinct from other, more 'natural' communities. Natural communities exist because their members want them to exist, they often form spontaneously, and, if they become irrelevant, they shrivel and die.

Marketing communities (such as Next's presence on Facebook with over 100,000 'liking' it) seek to be as large as possible and are focused on changing the mind of members,

MROC CASE STUDY: NUS

The National Union of Students (NUS) represents 95% of students in the UK and is a confederation of 600 local unions. The organisation wanted to redesign its website and was determined to put students at its heart. It commissioned Virtual Surveys (a UK pioneer in MROCs) to create and moderate the MROC.

The project lasted two weeks and involved 57 young people, a mixture of sixth-formers, undergraduates and postgraduates. Rather than simply thinking about young people's expectations of student websites, the project explored 'best in class' sites, including Facebook, eBay, the BBC and Wikipedia. The members of the community contributed their views, discussed options, posted views, visited

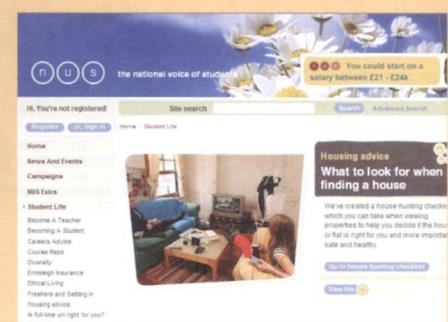
encouraging them to buy, to consume, and to become word-of-mouth advocates.

MROCs tend to be smaller (from about 30 through to about 2000), to be private (invitation only and not visible to the rest of the web), and to concentrate on research or research and innovation (see case studies).

In the May issue of *Admap*, research innovators Mark Earls and John Kearon presented the case for moving from what they term Me-Research – from the traditional researcher-centric approaches, such as surveys, focus groups, and databases, – to an approach they have dubbed We-Research. The latter is based on collaborating with customers and citizens. In their initial study, Earls and Kearon reported on training citizens to use their mobile phones to be amateur ethnographers, exploring the 'human condition' around them.

Another example of We-Research is the way Mesh Planning empowers its participants to use mobile phones to capture their own stories and brand experiences, to enable it to measure brand communications and states of mind.

The processes of evolution and revolution is well underway, but the direction in which they will take the insight gathering process is still unclear. At one extreme, there



a range of sites, and expressed ideas and views on suggested routes.

The project resulted in a new website that was widely seen as a major improvement and gave a sense of ownership to the students who had participated.

are those who seek to 'master' these new changes, to fit them into the traditional structures of command and control, to establish 'robust' methodologies based on 'scientific' approaches.

At the other end, there are those who see a fundamental disruption of the insight gathering process. This view sees the future as discussions between brands and customers, possibly facilitated by research, but maybe disintermediated.

What is clear about the future is that it is going to be much more transparent, based on conversations, not metrics, and based on openness and a sharing of power. Brands will need to learn that listening means more than letting people talk, it means hearing them, it means acting on their comments, and it means sharing the credit.

Most of the examples in this article are drawn from the author's forthcoming book, *Handbook of Online and Social Media Research*, which is being published by Wiley in August and can be pre-ordered from Amazon.



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