

Contributed by Scott Hagedorn

# HARNESSING THE POWER OF BLOGS FOR MARKETING



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In the digital world, we've been dealing with technological decentralization and the rise of the individual voice for a long time. Starting with bulletin boards (BBs) in the 1980s, then Websites, and now blogs, it has become easier and easier for individuals to make their voices heard.

Relative to the pharmaceutical industry, blogs give individuals an opportunity to enhance, hijack, or subvert corporate communication channels.

Blogs can deliver almost immediate recognition for a medication's effectiveness, and they offer third-party endorsement that money can't buy. Blogs also can be the canary in the coal mine for unanticipated side effects or the harbinger for straight up misinformation.

As marketers, we'd be remiss not to realize, recognize, and act on the power that a blog from a patient can have regarding his or her treatment experience. But with so many online diaries and testimonials created every day, it's much harder to keep our fingers on the pulse.

Generally speaking, we know that there are an estimated 65,000 news groups, 80,000 chat groups, more than 1 million Internet communities hosting message boards, and 10 million blogs, according to Cyveillance (2003) and Google (2005).

In the past two and a half years, text-mining software has become available that allows us to analyze what customers are saying about our clients' brand to others, especially to people who are not yet customers, in chat rooms, news groups, blogs, bulletin boards, and so on.

## HARVESTING THE RESEARCH

One option to harvesting these data is the use of online anthropology tools to collect and monitor overall buzz from hundreds of thousands of conversations occurring in real time.

Such tools can be used subjectively for both exploratory and evaluative initiatives.

To conduct analysis for our clients, we harvest all of the conversation strings that include terms we're interested in (sometimes more than 1 million).

For example, for a diabetes product, we analyzed more than 390,000 conversations that included the terms "diabetes," "low carb," and "insulin levels," and then we analyzed for:

**Leaders and Influencers.** Who are the people leading the conversations? Where are they in the disease cycle? What criteria or expertise have sanctioned them as an influencer on this topic?

**Attitudes and Motivations.** What are their attitudes about the condition and getting treated? What are their attitudes about available treatment options? Do they respect the diagnosis of healthcare providers?

**Content.** What types of conversations is the brand a part of? What are people saying about the product?

**Location and breadth of involvement.** Where are people talking about the brand? Are discussions happening among just special interest groups or are they more broadly based conversations?

**Novice questions and expert answers.** What types of questions are people asking about the brand and what types of answers are they receiving from those who claim to know?

**Shifting patterns over time.** How is the market reacting to competitive moves, marketplace events, and so on?

## USING THE RESEARCH

Once the data have been gathered, the learnings can be used to develop communications that will resonate with prospective patients. For example, online anthropology work for a new epilepsy drug revealed that there was an overwhelming interest in drug therapies, and the online "experts" were those who had tried the most number of treatments.

Conversely, while researching a Type 2 diabetes drug, it was discovered that the efficacy of drug therapies was only discussed in about 10% of all online conversations. The primary concern for these prospects was the debilitating effect of diabetes in their daily lives where "food becomes the enemy" as one patient put it. Authority figures were those who had developed coping strategies. Obviously, the marketing approach should differ for each drug based on what the blogs reveal.

These insights can help marketers design a CRM program, for example, that identifies "copers" or "noncopers." Leveraging the power of the peer network, noncopers (often newly diagnosed patients) are paired with "copers" for tips, advice, and support. A program's Website can assume the role of a "coper" as well and offer people with diabetes the opportunity to explore areas of personal interest or concern and download practical tips and advice from cyberexperts.

The transparency of the Web has changed marketing forever. We must first make it a priority to listen to the conversation and then find ways to leverage what we hear in a way that is unobtrusive and complementary to the company's business and marketing goals.

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