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Mapping and leveraging influencers in social media to shape corporate brand perceptions

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Abstract

Purpose – The emerging new influencer community is wielding significant power over the perceptions of brands and companies, largely driven by the rapid expansion of social media channels through which influencers communicate. The "nobodies" of the past are now the new "somebodies" demanding the attention of communication professionals who seek continuous engagement with targeted consumers throughout the various channels of the social web. The purpose of this paper is to present a means of identifying these new "somebodies".

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviews a customizable valuation algorithm created to identify the "new somebodies" who are the influencers creating a revitalized level of brand awareness for companies. The index valuation algorithm measures a cross-section of variables that numerically rate influencers in the social media conversation about a particular company, product or service.

Findings – This information helps us understand how these "somebodies" influence traditional target audiences, and help communications professionals establish effective outreach strategies. Integrating the influencer index data into a holistic social media strategy provides a comprehensive social media approach for optimizing brand equity.

Originality/value – The index identifies the "conversation points" that should guide engagement with each individual influencer, determining aspects such as subject and tone, and identifies these influencers.

Keywords Communication management, Communication systems, Competitive advantage, Corporate communications, Corporate branding, Public relations, Brand awareness, Social media

Paper type Research paper

The brand will be socialized

Global enterprises are struggling today to understand how social media impacts their brands. Corporate management is witnessing a new level of activism from an influential constituency rarely heard from in the past – ordinary consumers. Many of these new consumer influencers are gaining a large share of voice in the market thanks to the power of the internet, and to technologies that bring together people who share common interests. Consumers are impacting brand equity as never before. This unnerves corporate marketing practitioners with responsibility for brand management. How can corporate marketing control the reputation of their brand in an environment which is increasingly out of their control?

Companies feel pressure to control the brand conversation. They may not currently have a voice in the social media space and feel an acute need to immediately jump

in the conversation flow to simply catch up. However, establishing a presence on Twitter or Facebook without the due diligence required to make the effort worthwhile will produce few worthwhile results. Simply acquiring a presence on these sites for the sake of maintaining control over the brand discussion provides the illusion of taking action and taking action often feels like taking control.

The truth is that corporate marketing never had control of the brand. The ownership of the brand and its reputation has always belonged to the consumer. Some companies outsource the solution to this problem to a digital marketing agency, which delivers services that focus on the technical development of internet-based marketing products. These services can include web design, e-mail marketing or microsite software development. Additional services may include viral marketing campaigns, banner advertising, search engine optimization, podcasting or widget development. Digital marketing agencies tend to emphasize web-based tool development as a means to an end – focusing on everything except the most important social media element: the quality of the relationship between the firm and the consumer.

Brand ownership

The rate at which Americans are using the internet for social media purposes continues to increase year over year. Most notably, social networking and (micro-) blogging sites and video have increased, with:

> Four out of five internet users visiting a social network site on a monthly basis, with Facebook and Twitter propelling much growth in the industry, and six out of seven US internet users now viewing online video content in a month (Radwanick, 2010).

With this increase, brand ownership is increasingly being shared among consumers and the brands themselves. Through social networks, blogs and videos, consumers are entrenched in the dissemination of information. Long gone are the days when media would communicate a brand's message to consumers. Consumers are now the individuals broadcasting personal or second-hand stories to their social networks and the world. They are a brand's storytellers and the new brand ambassadors.

These storytellers must be leveraged and cultivated as part of a firm's social media strategy. Recognizing who your storytellers are and engaging them in your brand's discussion can shape, or in some cases, protect a brand's reputation. Companies must "listen" and monitor what is being said throughout the many channels of the social web. Whether the conversations generated are positive or negative, a firm awareness and understanding of their content enables practitioners to turn an unhappy consumer into a brand advocate. Companies must first listen and then act to have an active hand in owning their brand's story.

The importance of identifying activist influencers

Before any engagement begins in social media such as blogger outreach, practitioners must develop a strategy and align it with communications objectives:

> The goal is to stimulate an engaging conversation that allows us to change perception, diagnose expectations and bring clarity to the dialogue. That's the essence of developing a brand strategy – the foundation of your communication that builds authentic relationships between you and your audience. It is by defining your brand strategy that allows you to utilize

marketing, advertising, public relations and social media to consistently and accurately reinforce your character. Without defining the core strategy, all channels of communication can often become a hit and miss expense (Tsai, n.d.).

A critical element of success in any social media initiative is the strategy that drives the larger plan. Social media is about enabling conversations among your audience or market. Most companies already are deeply engaged in communications. Social media is all about building relationships and enabling conversations within the marketplace. As we know, control is an illusion. Companies cannot control the conversations with social media, but they can influence them. "Influence is the foundation on which all economically viable relationships are built" (Remorin).

A customizable social media valuation algorithm

With the explosion of blogging in recent years, identifying bloggers with relevant influence can be a daunting task. In an effort to streamline the analysis and help practitioners create a list of key relevant bloggers, a valuation algorithm has been created. The fundamentals in the development of corporate communications campaigns and plans remain the same in social media as they do in public relations. After the initial decision-making process, practitioners must then define communications objectives to begin mapping out influencers in which to engage in a digital conversation.

"Influentials generally do have many direct 'friends' and 'followers,' but what makes them truly valuable is the number and relevance of their extended or indirect connections" (Hall, 2010). The valuation algorithm or influencer index seeks to measure these connections to determine blogger influence. The influencer index identifies key influencers; helps brand managers understand how they influence other more traditional target audiences; and aids in establishing new strategies to reach these key influencers. The model evaluates a cross-section of variables, and illustrates a methodology for engaging these influencers in order to support brand-affecting communications objectives.

The variables are measured both quantitatively and qualitatively to determine a numeric rank of the blogger's influence. Additionally, the index identifies "conversation points" that guide engagement with each individual blogger, determining aspects such as subject and tone. Below is a list of each variable and its definition, as illustrated in the graph below:

- *Viewers per month (vpm).* The number of visits to the blog per month.
- *Linkages.* The popularity of blog post links inbound and outbound.
- *Post frequency.* Volume of posts per given time.
- *Media citation score.* Volume and level of media that cites blogger.
- *Industry score.* Number of industry guru points based on industry events such as key notes, bylines and panel participation.
- *Social aggregator rate.* Level of participation in the social web (e.g. Twitter, other bloggers/blog communities, LinkedIn, etc.).
- *Engagement index.* Reader response and the quantity of comments.
- *Subject/topic-related posts.* Volume and immediacy of subject/topic-related posts.

- *Qualitative subject/topic-related posts.* Qualitative review of subject/topic-related posts.
- *Index score.* Identification and rank of influencer in the social web based on above variables.

The algorithm ranks bloggers based on an average weighted score called the "index score." The development of the influencer index measures not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. To compute the index score, a rating system has been created to assign a value to each variable, measured on a scales of 1-5 for poor, fair, good, very good and excellent. Each rating corresponds to a different objective or subjective set of values. In addition, variable research uses social media monitoring services, manual identification and blogger authority vendors.

Shown in Figure 1 is the influencer index, providing a graphical illustration of the customizable valuation algorithm.

Because the algorithm is customizable, practitioners seeking to uncover a desired variable can add or delete from the influencer index to fit their needs.

The influencer index – an example
Figure 2 shows an example of how the influencer index works to showcase its value in identifying and analyzing bloggers as influencers. Pretend we are a client seeking

Blogger	Viewers per month	Linkages	Post frequency	Media citation score	Industry score	Social aggregator rates	Engagement index	Subject/topic related posts	Qualitative subject/ topic related posts	Index score
Method	*Quantcast*	*Technorati authority*	*Manual identification*	*Google alerts*	*Manual identification*	*Manual identification*	*Blogpulse conversation tracker/trend tracker*	*Google trends/blogpulse trend tracker*	*Manual identification/google alerts*	*Average weighted score*
Rating system	<500 = 1	<100 = 1	Once a month = 1	<2 = 1	1 = 1	1 point for use of tool	<3= 1	<3 = 1	More negative = 1	
	501- 1,000 = 2	101- 500 = 2	2- 5 per month = 2	3- 5 = 2	2– 4 = 2	Microblogs and social networks	4- 10 = 2	4- 8 = 2	Negative = 2	
	1,001- 5,000 = 3	501- 1,000 = 3	6- 10 per month = 3	6- 10 = 3	4– 6 = 3	Feed aggregator	11- 15 = 3	9- 12 = 3	Neutral = 3	
	5,001- 15,000 = 4	1,0001- 3,000 = 4	10- 15 per month = 4	11- 15 = 4	7- 9 = 4	Video/photo aggregation	16- 20 = 4	13- 16 = 4	Positive = 4	
	>15,0001 = 5	> 3,000 = 5	> 15 per month = 5	>15 = 5	>10 =5	Audio/ videocasting	>20 = 5	>16 = 5	Very positive = 5	

Ratings	
Excellent	5
Very good	4
Good	3
Fair	2
Poor	1

Weights applied	
VPM	10%
Linkages	15%
Post frequency rate	5%
Media citation rate	15%
Industry score	10%
Social aggregator rate	10%
Relevant topic post rate	5%
Conversation index	20%
Quantitative	10%
Total	100%

Figure 1.
The influencer index

Figure 2.
The influencer index:
an example

Blogger	VPM	Linkages	Post frequency	Media citation rate	Industry score	Social aggregator rate	Engagement index	Computer software related post rate	Qualitative related posts	Index score
Scobleizer	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	3	4.60
Rough type	4	5	5	4	5	3	4	2	3	3.70
Boy genius Report	5	4	5	1	1	1	5	3	3	2.80
Adam ok	0	1	4	0	0	4	2		4	1.45

Classification	
0 - 2	Level 1
2.1 - 3.5	Level 2
3.6 - 5	Level 3

to engage influencers who are active in social media that has covered the computer software industry. We would like to reach out to them to support an upcoming product launch. Our objective is to engage influencers in computer software with reach in specific arms of the social web.

After reviewing the results, the influencer index suggests that Scobleizer is an influencer in this space. Not only is this blogger an influencer, but his index score is 4.6 out of 5, classifying him as a particularly highly regarded and influential blogger. Once practitioners begin to use this analytical approach to identifying social media influencers, they can begin executing their social media campaigns.

Tiered index results

As you begin to identify high-value bloggers it becomes possible to categorize them into specific tiers.

Tier A blogs have a large readership and their writing tends to be more news oriented. They are often less social than Tiers B and C blogs and do not provide the advantages of a specifically targeted reach. Frequently, Tier A blogs have a team of contributors, accept advertisements, treat their topics in a broad context and provide the opportunity for expanded content. Many online news outlets fit this description.

Tier B blogs draw fewer readers than Tier A blogs, but tend to be more focused on a particular topic, providing insight and information occasionally found nowhere else. These writers are considered passionate authorities by their readers. Tier B blogs are often on the verge of massive recognition, often searching for ways to monetize their popularity.

Tier C blogs often draw the smallest amount of traffic, but can be the most influential outlets due to their extremely targeted subject matter. Authors of Tier C blogs are the grassroots enthusiasts searching for the story, topic, link or scoop to propel them out of obscurity into the public eye, and because of that desire, they write as passionate experts – not as objective, or trained journalists. Frequently, Tier C outlets provide frank, candid, detailed product reviews, and serve as springboards for op-eds and forums for thoughtful discussion.

Integrating results into a social media strategy

Each brand campaign requires a specific strategy to find, analyze and engage with appropriate blogs and bloggers. A well-developed strategy can help

ensure effective results. We use a consumer-to-consumer process as step-by-step strategy to optimize blogger outreach:

(1) Set objectives and strategies:

- Establish measurable goals that relate clearly to the initiative.
- Pinpoint target audience leveraging the influencer index results: professional bloggers, emerging bloggers, general interest bloggers, academics, developers, consultants, media and analysts.
- Define parameters of the activity.
- Determine strategic approach including reviews, contests, giveaways, causal, informational, sneak peek, invitations to key events.

(2) Search and analyze:

- Keyword searches:
  - Brand, product, services, competitors, industry experts.
  - Search engines (Blog search, Google.com, Technorati.com, Alltop.com).
  - Existing blog list (blog rolls and network affiliations).
- Analyze:
  - Subjectively: 45-to-1 rule – devote a minimum 45 minutes to reading every blog to determine relevance. Review about me, section, postings, comments, tone.
  - Three key questions: Who is talking? What are they saying? Do we fit in the conversation?
  - Objectively: viewers per month, index authority rating.

(3) Engage and socialize:

- Engagement:
  - Clearly identify intent.
  - Introduce topic before client.
  - Explain relevance.
  - Ask, do not tell.
  - Say thank you.
- Socialize:
  - Comment on relevant postings.
  - Follow on Twitter and social aggregators.
  - Connect on social networking sites.

(4) Report and refine:

- Agree on format and/or service.
- Link to objectives.
- Refine strategies.

Conclusion

In the world of social media, practitioners are transforming the way to communicate with their target audiences. While the fundamentals of public relations are essentially the same as social media relations, the addition of this new marketing channel allows practitioners to engage with influencers one on one. Practitioners must listen and act strategically and almost immediately to continue consumer conversations about their brands. With the immense growth of bloggers and their increasing power as influencers for media and consumers alike, analyzing and evaluating the most influential will be a vital part of any social media campaign.

The creation of a customizable valuation algorithm or influencer index is helping practitioners analyze and evaluate the varying degree of influence of any blogger on a particular topic. The dissection of a cross-section of variables provides a qualitative and quantitative review of each blogger being analyzed. The influencer index produces an influence score to help practitioners better identify the various influencers.

Identifying the tiers of influencers and how they fit into a brand's social media strategy will ensure a social media engagement that produces measurable results and a positive contribution to brand equity.

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