

The Art of Social Listening



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For years, organisations have put in both recourses and efforts to understand their customers. They relied on personal interviews, mail surveys, focus groups etc. to understand user preferences. However, none of these conventional tools were really accurate. Often the results when extrapolated to the wider audience which many a times ended up in disastrous results.

In 1985, Coca Cola famously decided to introduce a new reformulated flavor after a series of blind tasting that showcased a preference of Pepsi over their product. What was then famously called “New Coke” was intended to replace the initial cold drink formula. However, it failed miserably in the market. Coca Cola reportedly lost on millions in this venture . In 1989, Reebok were skeptical over the shoe design with internal inflation mechanism to cushion the ankle. The reason was simple. The issue never came across in their countless focus groups. But, when they went ahead and launched the first inflated air shoes called Reebok Pump, it instantly became a huge hit. In fact, in 2014, Reebok celebrated 25 years of this launch by releasing a new line of shoes by collaborating with various designers.

Big Data to the rescue

One of the major cases of Big Data technologies is that the enterprises realised that it had the ability to analyse information in areas that previously seemed impossible. Hence, information produced at high velocity and volume became easy to be processed and interpreted. One such channel that got millions of logs of tweets, updates, likes, and subscribers was social media platform.

When social media opened the gate providing an avenue to discuss and document daily activities, interests etc., brands found a new channel to engage with their audience. The fact that conversations in social media tend to be more direct and candid, made them excited. However, they were cautious about it too. There are still numerous examples of brands adopting heavily intrusive approach on social media without realising that fundamentally these channels are a personal platform.

The real opportunity for brands is in taking the back seat initially and identifying what and how are people actually conversing about their brand. Today there are plenty of tools and mechanism that allows companies to understand the underlying sentiment behind the product. But mere recording of sentiment is not enough, in fact understanding and acting is more necessary. Not to mention the opportunity of being in an open platform means you can listen to what the market is saying about your competitors as well.

There have never been an even level playing field and democratisation allowing brands to exploit. Enterprises can choose to invest on ideas that resonate with the community. Starbucks, well known for their close association with customers, ran a crowdsourcing campaign called 'My Starbucks Idea'. Just in the first year, they collected thousands of ideas, of which they implemented about 300. This is a fantastic way to highlight that your customers have a say in your product roadmap.

In 2015, after year of petitions on social channels, Fox Studios finally caved in and agree to the 'R' rated superhero movie Deadpool starring Ryan Reynolds. After years of looking the other way, it was the reception of a leaked test footage that finally made them to listen to their audience. The movie developed and promoted with heavy self-referential humor led the movie to become the highest grossing 'R' rated film and the fifth highest grossing film in 2016. This was a perfect example of how the social channels are fulfilling the need of a non-existent product.

The primary focus for enterprises, when implementing a social listening ecosystem, should be to understand the business challenge they are trying to solve. Without a clear vision of what is to be achieved, the project could easily be lost in the woods. The sheer volume of data it would collect, process and analyse would need cutting edge Big Data applications. One also needs shared responsibilities between departments like Marketing and IT, when it comes to expectations and deliverables. Social Listening is a consistently evolving space and along with the advent of Big Data is only becoming incisive & imaginative. Today enterprises already have some form of social listening programs, but at the end of the day it is the understanding of the 'gap in customer need' that would fundamentally help them succeed.

The proverb goes 'the man who listens, is the one who understands'. Let us become the one who is listening.

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