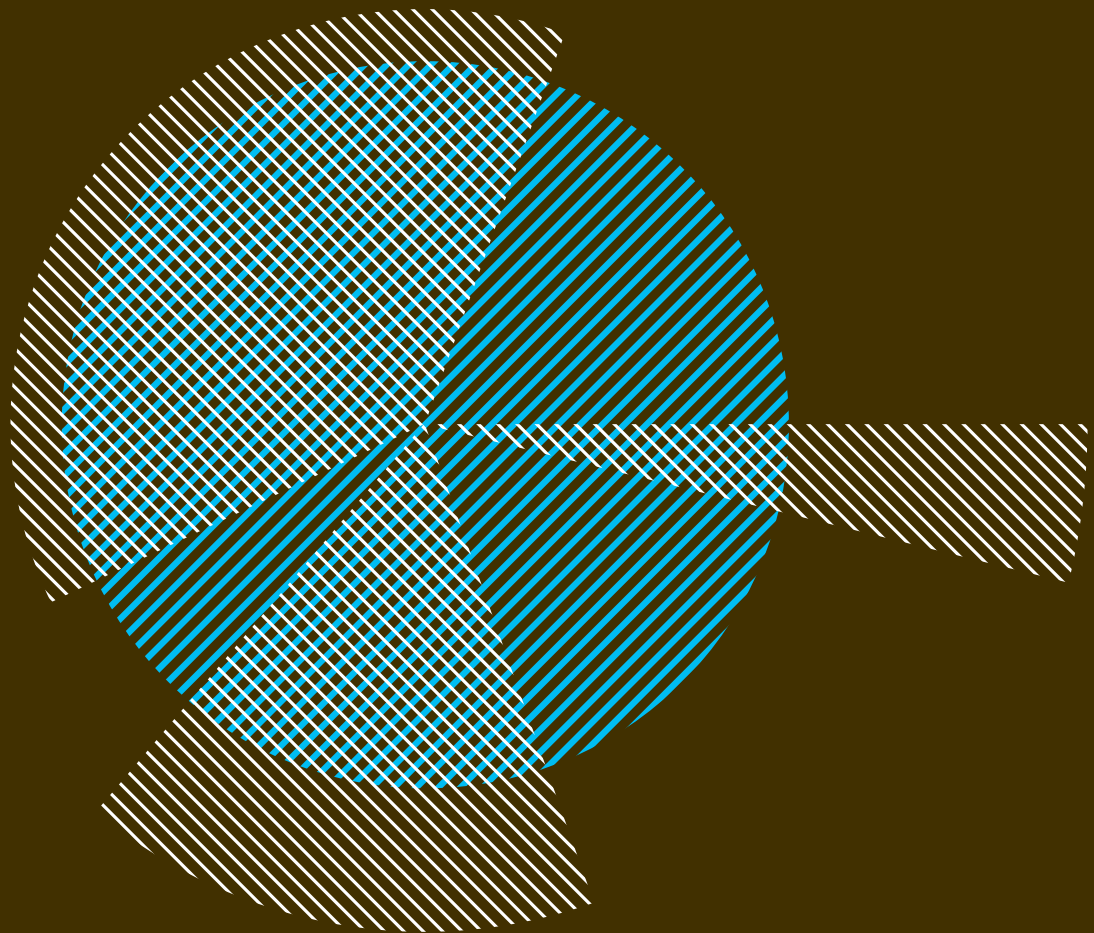


VML MARKETING INTELLIGENCE REPORT

# Measuring the Social Mix: Qualitative, Quantitative and a Bit of Intuition

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## Background

Word of mouth is perhaps the world's oldest form of advertising and one that has proven nearly impossible for marketers to target and measure ... until recently.

With the explosion of online social platforms, communities and self-publishing average joe's, established and emerging social monitoring technologies promise comprehensive, quantitative results that will deliver rich meaning and insight. But success is a measure of more than just numbers and percentages across consumer buzz. What is the value of a conversation? Ask yourself - what was the most meaningful conversation you had today? Was it one that changed your attitude? Or one that reinforced your point of view? Did you listen more intently to a podcast of a respected subject matter expert - or to your peer during a casual hallway conversation? These are questions that numbers cannot answer.

A tally of "friends," views, ratings, comments or buzz does not paint a complete picture. Word of mouth by its very nature is fueled not by technology, but by relationships: peer-to-peer, antagonist-to-protagonist, expert-to-advice seekers, support groups, one-to-many, many-to-many - not to mention the scores that don't fit neatly into defined categories. Digital word of mouth is a quagmire of

conversations. Fishing the meaning out of these complex online relationships can vary by industry, business goals and by audience, and using a singular approach to target and measure social media is a fallacy. Forget the "start date, launch date, end date" model. The target audience is no longer a nameless, faceless desired demographic to whom brands can scale campaigns. Rather, social media is relationship-building that requires time and effort, give and take, honesty and transparency.

Social media metrics do require a quantitative backbone. But measure of social success includes intangibles that aren't standard issue in campaign performance reports (i.e., tone of voice, originality, emotional connection). Marketers should define and interpret the metrics as numerically savvy social anthropologists - not pure data analysts. There is no silver bullet for social media measurement, but that doesn't mean that your company cannot define what it means to move the needle. The methods described herein have guided numerous social media campaigns - from planning, to engagement, to measurement and optimization.



## STEP ONE: LISTEN BEFORE YOU LEAP

Listening in social media means two things: 1) measure and 2) understand. Step one listening is the measurement – numbers, graphs, charts and percentages. Listening step two is covered in a later section.

Establish a quantitative baseline during early planning stages to provide a solid framework for rich qualitative analysis during the engagement. The following metrics assume that measurements are taken across an ecosystem of targeted, relevant online data defined by topic of interest of target audience, including a mix of publicly accessible consumer-generated content, news, forums, etc. It is possible to isolate ecosystems and identify relevant conversation using social monitoring software.

### Share of voice

Measure with two lenses.

1. Percentage of your brand versus competitor brand mention.
2. Percentage of your brand versus all other conversation.

One, brand versus competitor, is straightforward.

Two, brand versus all other conversation, is an indicator of how central a brand is to a discussion. For example, we worked with a sports brand to track brand mention across an ecosystem of European football enthusiasts. While the percentage of brand versus competitor brand mention was relatively similar, the percentage of brand mention in relation to all other conversation was miniscule. This measurement drove the strategy for the project. We needed to create compelling engagements around the football players and teams instead of the brands alone, connecting with consumers around their passions.

### Weighted share of voice

Similar to above, but different. Weighted share of voice factors in influence. Does your brand or product have presence among influential, authoritative sites? What is driving the presence or lack thereof?

Influence. We define influence as the number of inbound links to a particular site. It's roughly a measure of third-party endorsements from across the web. The greater the number of people who link to your blog or website, the higher your influence ranking. High influence ratings tend to organically align with: frequently updated content, high-quality and accurate postings, high readership and thought leadership.

This metric makes a few assumptions. Influence is a good thing. Brand presence among those who have influence is beneficial. Since consumers trust other consumers almost twice as much as they trust paid advertising (Forrester Research, Inc. and Intelliseek), the goal of any social media effort is to fuel positive word of mouth by relationship-building and empowering brand advocates. If these brand advocates are speaking to large audiences and have the credibility to help shape opinions, even better.

If a brand is present but appearing only in areas of low influence, then the reach of social media efforts may be quite limited. Build social media engagement strategies to garner the attention of key influencers – harnessing their energy to reach your audience in ways that paid media cannot.

This was a key metric in an initiative we implemented for a telecommunications company. Using our social monitoring tool, we identified key influencers discussing mobile products and services and invited them to be brand Ambassadors and try a newly released phone. They received the phone, three months' free service, and we asked them only for their feedback about the product. We assumed they would likely blog about their Ambassador experience – and they did, nearly 400 of them. Because of their high levels of influence, their opinions about the product reached a very large audience. Luckily for our client, those opinions were almost entirely positive. The Ambassador program generated an enormous amount of online buzz, attracted national media attention, and ultimately helped boost subscriptions nearly 50 percent above the number expected.

Influence is important. Bolstering brand aware-



Figure 1  
MEASURING QUALITY of CONVERSATION

My financial client	Competitor company	Retirement planning
Score: 3.5	Score: 1	Score: 7
(penetration: 350, share: 100)	(penetration: 100, share: 100)	(penetration: 3500, share: 500)

ness and fuelling positive sentiment among this group can yield enormous returns. Watching the shift of weighed share of voice is one way to measure effectiveness of social media.

**Competitive comparative mention**

This metric is built loosely on the notion of keeping thy friends close – but thy enemies closer. Do your brand and key competitors appear in the same conversations? What is the comparative mention between them? If competitor mention is absent in contextual comparison, then where are they hiding? Some brand monitoring tools can provide this information – the cross-section of brand mention with key themes or topics.

This measurement was central to answering a hefty brand positioning question for an automotive client. Could they move a family car into the purchase consideration set for consumers considering a near-luxury vehicle?

We found that while some family cars existed on the periphery of the near-luxury conversation, our brand lived in an entirely different location altogether. In fact, our consumers were attracted to our brand’s family car because it wasn’t a seemingly over-priced near-luxury class model. We located robust, independent online owner forums of consumers who owned our family car model. Consumer participation in those forums was impressive and something absent across the near-luxury competitive set. Marketing with a near-luxury message would quite possibly alienate consumers who were fuelling this brand passion and loyalty that brands can’t buy!

Our advice to the client? Elevate marketing

around key attributes that are important to near-luxury consumers. Let’s measure again in a few months to see if that moves the needle in terms of comparative competitive mention. In the meantime, energize conversations among the core consumers – keep that passion alive by engaging them.

**Quality (a.k.a. depth of conversation)**

Do conversations happen at a surface level, or do consumers have a deeper emotional connection with the brand? This measurement reveals if a brand is relevant – and has been relevant for some time – or if a brand is just the flavor of the week because of a new promotion, campaign or product launch.

Measure quality using two figures:

1. Penetration – the number of individual web pages in an ecosystem that mention a brand.
2. Share of voice – the number of individual websites in an ecosystem that mention a brand. Websites should include blogs, forums, dotcoms, wikis, newsgroups – any site that is publicly accessible and relevant to the brand or topic.

Quality is the quotient of Penetration/Share. The lowest level of quality is one – and there is no cap on the high end. Higher levels of conversation quality indicate that a brand will likely weather the fickleness of the target audience.

For example, let’s say I have mapped 500 sites into an ecosystem focused on finance, investments and retirement planning. I want to measure the quality of conversation around a financial client, a competitor and “retirement planning.” (See Figure 1.)



This shows me that my financial client has a higher quality of conversation than the competitor. My client is mentioned on 100 sites – and the brand name appears 350 times on those 100 sites, averaging 3.5 pages of discussion per website. It’s a deeper, more engaged conversation than the competitor who is also mentioned on 100 sites, but only 100 times – averaging one page of discussion per website. Retirement planning has twice the quality of my client conversation – this represents opportunity for my financial client to become a larger part of the retirement planning discussion.

### **Ecosystem connectedness**

The more tightly connected an ecosystem of sites, the faster and more efficient seeding activity and engagement tend to be. It’s the difference between dropping a handful of leaves into a stagnant pond – and dropping the same leaves into a swiftly moving river that flows into several tributaries.

The measure is a quotient of total links across an ecosystem/number of sites in an ecosystem. We use our brand monitoring tool to secure this number. Ecosystem connectedness can vary by audience. A highly connected ecosystem of football enthusiasts looks quite different from a highly connected ecosystem of software developers.

Ecosystem connectedness can be affected by events, seasonality and news. Rarely can a brand have an impact on ecosystem connectedness. An exception to that would be a revolutionary product launch (enter: Apple iPhone). In the sports brand example above, we watched the European football ecosystem swell leading up to the 2006 World Cup. Italy clinched the title in early July – and by mid-month, the ecosystem linkage had dissipated to levels that made it look like a shell of its former self.

Brands can harness consumer-generated energy and momentum across an ecosystem to maximize engagement – but timing is everything.

### **Dispersion of message or content**

Locate examples of brand messaging or content that have travelled virally (or not) through the ecosystem

or attracted several comments/attention – either in the blogosphere or on content sharing sites like YouTube or Flickr. This tells us a lot about the emotional appeal of the brand – and guides content development, seeding and engagement strategy. Dispersion of brand content of messages can be tracked with a social monitoring tool. If the content is originating from a brand or company, that content should be tagged to allow for easier tracking.

Establish these quantitative baselines before a brand executes activity that will affect the conversation (new product, campaign or promotional launch, campaign, event sponsorship, active blogosphere engagement). Then, measure the effects of brand activity on the ecosystem across the measurements above. Numbers are the first piece of the puzzle.

### **STEP TWO: KNOW THY AUDIENCE. GENUINELY.**

Listening, part two. Numbers are important, but understanding context and nuance are critical when approaching engagement as a marketer. I cannot build a social media strategy solely from a collection of graphs, pie charts and percentages. However, I can build that strategy if I understand those figures in context of behavioral information about the people with whom I want to directly engage.

Some clients ask two questions that really concern me in discussions about social media. “How many impressions can you guarantee?” and “How can we automate and scale this?” Pause for a moment – return to square one. Social media is about building relationships and trust – in an effort to fuel consumer brand advocacy. Traditional campaign structures will backfire.

Think about a close relationship in your life – with a friend, a family member, a spouse or significant other. What makes that relationship tick? Trust. Understanding. Hard work. Give and take. Humor. Affection. Shared interest. A genuine concern for the well being of each other. In a healthy relationship, you feel valued, respected, and some part of you is emotionally fulfilled. The measure of success of a relationship is that it sustains and grows, healthily,



upon that foundation of trust, and understanding and that all parties are steeled to weather tough times, remaining loyal and devoted.

Apply the merits of good relationship-making to social media. Apply them to the target audience-turned-individual – people who have a name, a story and a friendly smiling photo to boot. You cannot control the people closest to you – what they say, what they think, how they feel – but you can do several things to influence them. Their perception of you is based on everything from the tone of your voice and the language you use to the frequency with which you’re in contact and relationship history. These same principles apply when brands approach social media.

Since the approach to social media isn’t an exact science, the metrics used to measure its value are flexible as well. The quantitative measurements help us signpost an ecosystem – locating the important places to look and dig as social anthropologists. Then it becomes a manual process of understanding the language, the individuals and the context through the lens of a human being instead of just a computer. These are some of the squishy metrics of social media to consider:

### **Tone and tenor**

This is more than evaluating positive or negative sentiment. Measuring positive and negative sentiment is kind of like a windsock – it will generally tell a brand which direction the wind is blowing in regards to consumer sentiment. But sentiment is not actionable. Tone and tenor certainly can be.

In an ecosystem of hundreds or thousands of individual websites, actually reading the conversations can reveal a tone of voice that can be playful, scientific, laced with skepticism or buoyed with supportive language. You might learn that your consumers are actually more sophisticated than your advertising gives them credit for. It may reveal that your brand message isn’t resonating because it lacks emotional appeal.

Tone and tenor can reveal brand affection, discontent and other cues that can be addressed

through both traditional and social media. Optimize your creative messaging to match the way your consumers talk to each other. Most importantly, match tone and tenor when you begin to directly engage with consumers through social media.

### **Authorship emotion and originality**

As an additional measure of emotion, we look for examples of authors opining and consumer content creation relevant to the brand ... as opposed to authors just linking to or publishing press releases on their sites.

This measurement can indicate just how much work a brand must do on the engagement front. If consumers are already actively creating original content about a particular product or brand, then creating excitement and building engagement with consumers is an easier mission than for brands who are absent from consumer-generated content and discussions.

### **Neighboring conversation**

This measurement is not dissimilar from looking at a town or city, and identifying the most desirable place to live based on criteria ranging from school districts to nightlife. Does your brand live in the neighborhood where you want it to be?

If you’re an automotive brand, neighboring conversation about environmental issues may be good or bad. Check the tone and tenor. If you’re a toy manufacturer sitting in the middle about websites concerned about toy recalls and lead paint, then you’re probably in trouble. If you’re a pharmaceutical company manufacturing drugs that treat cancer patients, your presence on patient treatment support sites is probably just as important (if not moreso) than prevalence across physician and industry sites.

Neighboring conversation can reveal subtle brand affinity, partnership opportunities and important messaging cues. Like moving to a new neighborhood, drive around surrounding streets to better understand the community, the layout and the triggers for your audience.



## Loyalty

As an emotional measure, brand loyalty revealed through social channels is not wholly quantifiable. Competitive comparative mention and conversation quality can be indicators of loyalty. If consumers are having in-depth discussions about my brand or product and my competitors are absent from that discussion, then it's very likely that I've identified some of my most loyal consumers.

As a social marketer, this loyalty metric helps me locate my brand's most avid supporters. By understanding their conversations (tone and tenor) and their interests and passions (neighboring conversation), as a brand I can engage with them in a way that complements their communication style, feels genuine instead of 'salesy' and further stokes the enthusiasm behind their word-of-mouth momentum.

There is no silver bullet to social measurement. Like personal relationships, the dynamics and factors of success are unique to the people and brands participating. But by establishing a strong quantitative backbone and spending some time as a human being to understand brand discussion in context, marketers are several steps closer to creating successful engagements to help move the needle across marketing objectives.

## STEP THREE: MEASURE AND OPTIMIZE

As with any marketing activity, social media should be measured and optimized. Again, a social monitoring tool is helpful to garner these measurements.

Continue to invest in the relationship – don't get lazy. Too many times I've watched companies go to the trouble of building rich and interactive content, successfully initiate a relationship with consumers, and then run out of steam (or interest) after a month or two. Engaging consumers initially is the hard part – and if you've succeeded in that effort, congratulations. Don't let them go. Engagement the second time around will be twice as difficult.

In social media, identifying the most valuable consumer is no longer locating who spends

the most money – but rather who influences the purchase decisions of others to spend money. It's the power of positive word of mouth through consumer channels, and thanks to technology, it's finally something that we can understand and influence as marketers. There are dozens of automated tools and technologies to assist with the effort, but at the end of the day, our mission as social marketers is to build and maximize key relationships in a way that benefits our brands. Understanding the balance of numbers and nuance is important – and it's not easy or straightforward. Successful relationships take hard work and commitment. But ultimately, this relationship-building can fuel the coveted positive word of mouth that brands and companies must earn from their consumers. ❄️

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