

AM I REALLY BRANDLESS?

Even If You're Not a Highly Branded Player in the Market, You Can Learn from Online Category Conversations in the Social Media Space

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The Internet consumer world is abuzz 24/7. Everybody talks about everything, and even a sliver of conversation can yield some usable insight. And because these insights are unprompted, highly personal, often public, and readily available, they provide a candid, honest, and real-time view of consumer perceptions. It is no longer a debate about whether social media research should be conducted or not, but more a matter of how one proceeds with it. This, in turn, depends on one's brand or category.

Along the brand-category spectrum, there are two extremes: some categories are so defined by a particular brand that they become synonymous with the brand (e.g., Kleenex and Popsicle); other categories are so commoditized due to the absence of a dominant brand (e.g., margarine, table salt or

printer paper) that it becomes difficult for any brand to make itself known.

When conducting social media research, special challenges exist for brands that occupy the "brandless" extremes described above. These insights *can* be turned into actionable strategies.

Are You Drowning in Branded Social Media Conversations?

Brands that occupy the space at either end of this spectrum are rendered effectively brandless in the social media space. They are not without a brand, but rather they are lost in a plethora of larger brands that are more talked about or among those cleverly marketed ones that go instantly viral. More broadly, there are several product categories that are not instantly identifiable.

When we mention Coca-Cola or Toyota, it's fairly obvious that we are talking about a beverage and an automobile, respectively. But there are product categories where the product is more prevalent than the brand. Think of our everyday uses in the office or our daily kitchen staples. Everything from whiteboards to staples, or tomato paste to table salt.

There are also other categories, where a single brand has become synonymous with the category, like the aforementioned Kleenex and Popsicle. While both brands do indeed have competitors, the category is effectively a monopoly.

Both extremes bring up the importance of brandless categories – brandless, that is, for new entrants or competitors that can easily fall from the consumer's awareness.

One such category that we examined was margarine, alongside its predecessor and inspiration, butter. As research shows, most consumers are not sensitive to the brands within this category: a mere 9 per cent of conversations about butter and 2 per cent of those about margarine allude to brands. So what is a margarine producer, for example, to do in a market where the category is more talked about than the brand itself? We render such a category effectively brandless, but there are solutions for overcoming the predicament. And these solutions hold for any brand or category that identifies with such a scenario.

Social Media Research Methods Get Practical

For a period of one year, we compared consumer attitudes regarding these two product categories, margarine and butter, in the social web space. While the comprehensive approach utilized in this study is applicable to any consumer brand that is mentioned with sufficient frequency, the study shows that it can work even sans branding and within a category itself. What sets this research apart from traditional monitoring is that the subsequent analysis and the interpretation of the data enabled important findings to be transformed into strategies.

Every relevant, publicly available comment was captured for analysis, including Facebook posts and “likes,” tweets, blog entries, user reviews, and anything that was publicly available on the Internet. Upon coding these for relevant information, we endeavoured to dig deeper, to find out not only how many times each brand was mentioned but the actual sentiment and passion behind the comments. The resulting insights can be used by producers of margarine to define online engagement, inspire offline activities, offer consumer insight, and even trigger other research – proving that there is tremendous value in digging deeper into the context and content of online conversations.

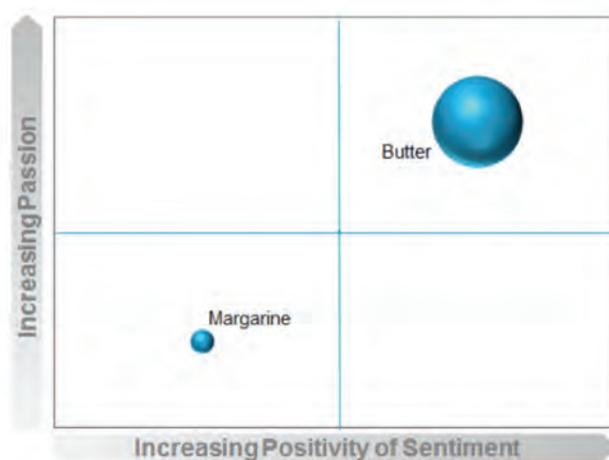
Measure Passion versus Volume

One could assume that volume is indicative of popularity, but is volume a true measure of positivity? And is it too much of a stretch to call it an indicator of loyalty? Think of all the negative press that BP got in the days of the Gulf coast oil spill or what would have happened if we had lived in the social media age when New Coke was launched.

Given such considerations, to deepen the understanding of consumers' subconscious perceptions of brands, it is critical to evaluate how consumers view a product's various characteristics. In our case, we looked mainly at taste and health. Such elements are tricky to deduce from traditional Q&As, since respondents are less likely to speak truthfully than they are within social networks. In the latter, deeply emotional insights can be interpreted with greater certitude because they come from unfiltered, unprompted conversations.

In order to understand and categorize the types of conversations happening around these brands, a 2x2 framework was developed to plot sentiment and passion around a collection of perceptions (taste, efficacy, value, etc.). In figure 1, sentiment is the range of conversations going from less positive to more positive; passion represents the intensity of the conversations, differentiating “like” and “dislike” from the stronger emotions of “love” and “hate,” respectively. By failing to consider the strength of a statement, epitomized by a measure of passion, many social media monitoring programs potentially miss important nuances and valuable insights.

Figure 1: Passion versus Sentiment in Social Media Conversations



Sentiment:

Continuum of negative to positive perceptions/sentiment

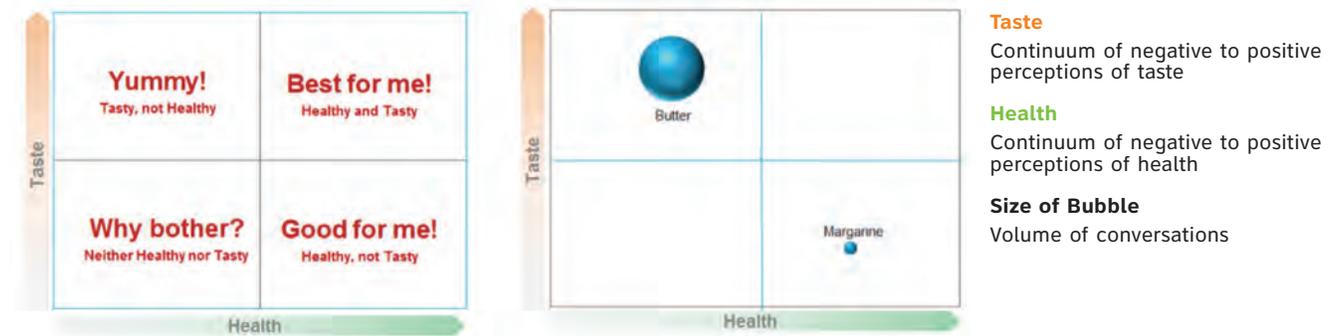
Passion:

Conversations that are extreme

Size of Bubble:

Volume of conversations

Figure 2: Health versus Taste Extremes in Social Media Conversations



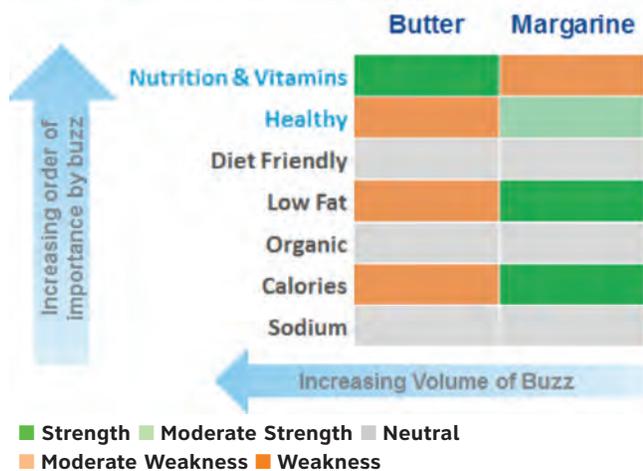
The results show that butter is talked about more than margarine and that it is greatly loved, while margarine falls into a “dislike” bucket.

Similarly, a matrix for taste versus health was created, owing to a common debate among consumers and producers of food products. As figure 2 shows, butter falls into a “yummy” classification, as one would intuitively expect – tasty but not particularly healthy. Margarine fares better in being healthy but is not considered tasty, placing it in the “good for me” bucket. While these are intuitive deductions, they are proven quantitatively via social media research, cementing the power of this medium.

Is Tasty and Healthy Even Possible?

A deeper dive, via statistical regression of the social media data, shows that consumers seek out “tasty” and “salty” as key elements in their spreads, both of which are prevalent strengths in butter but are weaknesses for margarine. And while margarine is low-fat, low in calories, non-greasy and healthier, the natural ingredients of butter (given its naturally derived origin) make it seem more nutritious and full of vitamins. Consequently, margarine is not often lauded for its scent or freshness. Figure 3 illustrates the importance of health-related attributes in social media conversations.

Figure 3: Measuring the Importance of Health-related Attributes in Social Media Conversations



The study thus reveals different elements of what consumers seek from their spreads, and while it validates some intuitive thoughts, it also sheds light on new notions. Empowered by new consumer insights, marketers are better prepared to make decisions on what their category strengths are, as well as on what elements they can emphasize or downplay in their advertising.

Think About Usage, Too

Branding can take you only so far; it is important to understand where and how a product is used. Social media dictates this condition quite readily, and often with insightful results. If a category is more talked about than a brand (i.e., the product is effectively brandless), then it is natural to deduce that the usage of the product is key to a brand’s marketing strategy.

We find that margarine is used overwhelmingly more often in baking and comes up more often in baking recipes than does butter, which is more often used for frying and general cooking. Similarly, the use of margarine exceeds that of butter in fast foods and personal cooking. Margarine is, in fact, talked about as a substitute for many other spreads as well and, not surprisingly, often occurs in the context of weight-loss conversations.

In sync with the rest of the findings is that one major drawback of margarine is that it’s not naturally derived – lowering its scores on other forms of research, too. Creating consumer personas of usage further builds on the fact that the influencers of or “heavy talkers” about margarine online are most active in communities, forums and blogs. The wealth of such information is already indicative of what the category can position itself as, and it is almost enough to inspire advertising materials and a rethinking of a distribution strategy – that is, if it is not already aligned with the way consumers actually consume margarine and butter.

Make Social Media Research Actionable

It's great to have truthful and current insights about your product category, and a good social media research study can provide these. Social media research may still feel like uncharted and unproven territory, but it can and should be approached with the same expectation of value as any other research method.

When social media insights are gathered using a model that ensures integrity and relevance, the results can shape strategies around sales and distribution; marketing and advertising; packaging and, of course, social media communications. Furthermore, as was the case with the findings of this study, the results can be used to trigger other forms of research, such as communications-related research, which can help formulate better articulations of the category strengths – for a margarine producer, for example.

Social media research is also a powerful complement to existing data sources. Even a study supplementary to classical research can help unravel the many behavioural elements of consumer research. These elements are often otherwise derived, from tedious diagnostic questions, and often rendered convenient but not fully reliable.

Assuming that success depends on allowing consumers to drive the development of new strategies, there is a growing need to listen more closely to and stay in sync with consumer perceptions. To that end, social media listening picks up where classical research falls short, and does so for both brands as well as virtually non-branded categories.

While classical research entails asking predetermined questions of targeted groups of consumers, social media research is an ideal method for gathering unfettered brand perceptions. Prompting consumers with questions may introduce a bias that inherently limits the value of the research. Social media listening – while constrained in its ability to provide guidance and structure to conversations – can elicit more candid and possibly more authentic feedback. Because the consumer world is loud, alive, and chatting in more ways than ever, it is something that marketers and researchers can never close their eyes to.

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