Subtle ways to measure social media's impact

The impact of social media on business can be difficult to measure, yet there are a number of subtle or indirect approaches you can take.

An advantage of online communication is that it can be measured automatically through web usage statistics, such as how many people clicked on various links. For social media that "live" online, some clicks are more useful to track than others. Typical click-throughs are actually measuring how effective the previous screen was in convincing readers to click to the next page. Those clicks don't tell us anything about how useful the information was once people landed on the page being monitored.

Beyond the usual click counts

Many social media clicks, however, do tell us about the usefulness of the ultimate landing page. When readers click on an RSS feed button, they're telling us that the information was not only useful, but so useful they want to keep seeing more of it. When they click on a "forward to a friend" button or "tag" an item, they're telling us it's so useful they want to make sure their colleagues and friends also have access to that information.

Similarly, if your website features a star-rating system or promote/demote arrow buttons to prioritize the value of several items on a page – such as multiple newsletter stories, previous podcasts/webcasts or search results – the page editor is receiving data that previously could be identified only through surveys: which topics are more useful than others. This type of information on usefulness can be used to tailor future social media content.

You can also make qualitative observations of what your audience is saying online, such as a comparison of the percentage of comments on blogs or discussion forums *versus* the number of original postings (known as the "conversation ratio"). You can categorize the comments as positive or negative to get a feel for how your audience is reacting to an issue. You can get a sense of how engaged people are about a topic by noticing the emotional heat of a discussion. For all these qualitative assessments, however, remember that the audience slice participating online may not be a representative sample of the audience.

Survey questions on social media outcomes

A survey about social media should not appear within social media themselves because it would elicit information only from the biggest users, not a random sample of the entire audience. In addition to typical questions about how satisfied users are with various features, the survey also should include questions that connect a particular social communication with desirable outcomes. For example, for a discussion forum on typical ethical conundrums at work and how other employees have handled them, you could ask a survey question to see how many employees read the forum and how many were able to apply that information to a real-life ethical situation they faced afterward.

Another way to use surveys is a bit more subtle. On an existing survey that already asks about desirable organizational outcomes, add a few questions about usage of communication tools, such as specific social media. Think of these questions as demographic items to identify differences among subgroups. For example, you could track if heavier participation in social media channels allowing interaction with executives

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(blogs, discussion boards, podcasts) is correlated with other survey scores on confidence in leadership or leader transparency. Another example would be if employees participating in an online wellness/preventive health social community report higher levels of actually losing weight, quitting smoking or other behaviors with a financial impact on company health costs. By comparing the financial benefits of the behavior changes against the cost of the time employees spend with the online community, a rough estimate of a return on investment could even be calculated.

Pilot and control groups

Several years ago IBM launched wikis for a pilot group of project teams working on similar tasks to other teams who didn't have access to a wiki. Results showed that the teams with wikis not only finished projects faster and with higher quality levels, but email volume among team members also dropped.

Another version of piloting social media can be used if you want your audience to take some action online, such as signing up for a training class or viewing a webcast. You can create unique URLs for the landing pages and use different ones in different communication about the action. This way you could compare the "conversion rate" of various tools, such as an article in a publication, an email or a discussion forum on a related topic.

So, social media impact can be measured in quite a few ways, most of which don't cost anything. We just need to be as creative with our evaluation approach as we are in creating the content.

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