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Awareness, Engagement And Sentiment - - The New Measures of Search?

by Chris Copeland, Friday, Mar 21, 2008 3:31 PM ET

Anyone who has dealt with Google knows that one of the unwavering points of view coming from Mountain View and beyond is that if the system is working for you, there should never be a cap on what you should spend. The rationale goes that if you are able to hit your metrics using Google, then you should constantly have 100% share of voice -- and the checkbook should remain open while they hand you the pen to put your signature in place, leaving it to them to fill in the amount. As a direct response vehicle, it is a difficult position to argue. If you need to sell 1 million widgets and do it at a given cost per widget sold, and Google can deliver, that, then why stop the pipe? The company has even developed a new system that spends any leftover budget as the system sees fit to help out advertisers in this cause.

But what happens when the metrics are not widgets sold online, but rather in-store activity, establishment of mental real estate in the consideration and exposure phase, and increased likelihood to engage with a brand? Then it becomes more difficult to not only leave the checkbook open, but to even open it in the first place.

This is the challenge that has faced the industry in two key ways. The first being in the CPG space and like areas, where buying online is far less crucial than buying at Wal-mart. The second being that as the purchase funnel online becomes more defined, advertisers try to understand what is going on up the funnel, and how to best support investment earlier in the consideration process.

Suddenly search marketers find themselves hearing a few words that don't sound like our comfortable direct response terms. As a group, search marketers like cost per good sold, return on ad spend and margins. Those in the bid management business have made their living by evangelizing the portfolio management approach, which centers on optimizing groups of keywords to hit a given target. But when the target is awareness, exposure or intention, the ability for those tools to work against those concepts disappears faster than a blank check made out to Google.

Last Fall, Yahoo released a study on CPG advertising that provided several valuable stats:

Teens? Gen Xers?
Online every day?

Free Report

Casale
MEDIA

Today's Most Read

1. [Buyers Want C3 Sports Ratings, Programmers Protest](#)
2. [LinkedIn Partners With BusinessWeek To Launch Company Profiles](#)
3. [New Balance's New Bag: The Angst Of Running](#)
4. [Forbes To Launch Ad Network](#)
5. [Hulu is the new iTunes, but for TV!](#)

- 73% of searchers are looking for product information and help, compared to 58% of non-searchers.
- 64% of searchers are looking for help on a purchase decision, while only 44% of non-searchers are.
- Searchers spend 20% more in the category than non-searchers.

Two of the more interesting findings were:

- 47% of searchers are looking for a promotion, but 57% of non-searchers look for promotions
- 27% of searchers switch brands because of price, but 38% of non-searchers switch products to save money

That means that as we fall into a recession domestically, CPG marketers can speak more with consumers that are less coupon-driven and cost-conscious through search than other vehicles. This audience uses search to find the best, not the cheapest.

So, how then should we assist advertisers in their quest to engage these consumers when the metrics are in the store? Through awareness, engagement and sentiment.

Awareness

Possibly the easiest of the three to measure on the surface. Google Trends can give you a baseline of query data for a given brand against another brand. ComScore's qSearch and Hitwise data enables clients to get an approximation of awareness shifts over time by indicating where traffic is going on a timeline. This allows you to see over a period of time if other media channels are spiking search activity and if your efforts are changing click behaviors. ComScore and Compete, among others, have begun to offer brand-specific studies to help advertisers start to appreciate how perceptions can be changed via search. Unfortunately, in many cases the volume of queries and the pool of participants make these spotty at best.

Engagement

One of the brightest Googlers is Avinash Kaushik, author of "Web Analytics: An Hour a Day." Avinash's blog (<http://www.kaushik.net/avinash/>) should be a daily read for all marketers, not just those in search and digital. One of the roles Avinash plays for Google is to sit with clients and get them thinking differently about data, including what matters in the data and what does not. How should a pharmaceutical company that will never sell a product online, and relies on physicians to write the prescriptions, measure search? Likewise, when an auto manufacturer sells a minuscule percentage of cars online, how should it evaluate search?

By now, most are familiar with my views on segmentation and the funnel, but the truths of those columns remain. To effectively

move up the funnel you must assign value to actions and measure the impact those actions have. While everyone learned in school that every action has an equal and opposite reaction, what they've forgotten in the search space is that every action has a meaning. From a choice not to click to the path taken and the time spent, there is learning to be had. Identifying which actions matter and how to measure is then the key. Within our agencies, we've done it by assigning weighted value to actions that guide our bidding strategies.

Sentiment

Talk about moving entirely away from the direct response comfort zone. Sentiment is all about feeling, while search is about action. There are some small ways to get at sentiment through search. One of the most amusing is to understand the negative tone around a given brand in search. All search marketers have had, at one time or another, a client or prospective client that was consumed by the desire to get something negative pushed off the first page of search results. Understanding the tone of results, when generated by users, is a key first step in framing the conversation.

The next generation of this measurement often leaves the search results page and moves into the arena of social networks. Blogs, Twitter, Digg and del.icio.us are all hotbeds for exposure to true consumer sentiment. The trick is how to best measure and frame that discussion. Today the tools are emerging and the data is enormous. The volume of twitters around the SXSW interview of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg last weekend shows that the speed with which the community can go from silent to screaming is almost instantaneous. Last month, I spoke of Digital Asset Optimization (DAO) -- and I feel myself more and more drawn to what is happening with the numerous locations where search learnings can directly impact in social ways. The notion of how marketers connect content and intent in various media feels like a massive challenge for the industry -- far more of a challenge than how do I decide to be in position #2 or #3. If I am right, then this concept of "Sentiment" is going to be a major measurable in the search space.

Why? Because like "Awareness" and "Engagement," search is the single largest petri dish of consumer expression that exists. Tapping into query-level data and beginning to understand patterns of interest and feelings towards the brands we represent is a Grail of sorts. The methods of measurement, be it engine tools, site analytics packages or third party brand studies, are all in their infancy.

And that brings us back to Google. It makes sense for Google to advocate an open checkbook, while making media more measurable all at the same time. But in a media world that is increasingly fragmented, it will be important to understand these types of metrics. So when we consider who should open the checkbook to be part of the solution in helping marketers with these measurements, it seems like the answer is already holding the pen.

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