A practical guide to social insight

Introduction

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The relentless growth of social media and search data means sources of consumer information are rapidly multiplying. It's an exciting time for insight professionals – we're in a great position to capitalise on this wealth of fresh, in-the-moment, user-generated opinion.

But it's easier said than done. The amount of data available is growing exponentially as new platforms emerge and existing ones broaden and deepen user experiences. Consumers are constantly connected, and it is easier than ever to share photos, videos and experiences. Even with a move to closed forums, partnerships with companies like Facebook allow us into these 'walled gardens' to illuminate private conversations. This tidal wave of information can be overwhelming, making it increasingly difficult to extract usable insight.

While many companies have access to social listening services, they often don't have the time required to derive full value due to the volume of content, and the challenge finding relevant insights. They stand in front of a huge wall of tweets, updates, shares and likes, and struggle to efficiently draw the right insights from the data available. It can become a fishing expedition based on a lot of hard work, intuition and personal prejudice rather than rigorous strategy.

We believe social media analysis is moving into a new phase of development. By recognising both its benefits and limitations, and how it complements traditional research approaches and other data sources, it can provide significant value.

The future of insight is data agnosticism – different sources of data have different merits. We tailor our approach based on our clients' specific business issues, and combine insights from the most relevant sources, to meet their needs as efficiently as possible. Social data is growing up. Handled correctly it provides faster, better and more predictive insight.

This guide provides a practical approach to combining social insight with traditional methods to inform effective decision-making.

Bob Burgoyne

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Chapter 1: The value of social insight

Social media and search data provide an instant, real-time snapshot of what consumers are saying, thinking and doing.

The potential is obvious: you've got a full range of unfiltered opinions about your brand that respond to events as they happen. This provides insights that are inherently actionable, in a timeframe that lets you act.

Used in the right way, insights from social and search provide the following benefits:

Predictive power: By identifying the right 'signals' from social and search data, we can understand how mass market opinion is moving.

Niche opportunities: The volume of data available allows us to understand opinions amongst niche audiences and identify emergent topics as they appear.

Authentic voice: We hear from consumers in their own words, unprompted, on the topics that are relevant to them.

Real-time responsiveness: It's an 'always on' source of information and changes in opinion register rapidly.

Unknown unknowns: It can provide unexpected insight – things that you didn't anticipate, or think to ask.

Granularity: Social conversations can be rich and detailed, yielding a depth of relevant insight. Some channels also provide access to the opinions of highly creative consumers.

Engaged consumers: Social conversation often represents the opinions of highly engaged consumers – the people whose opinions are of most interest.

Historic learning: Social data is often available for years gone by. This enhances survey research that can be limited in its ability to 'look back'.

Integrated marketing: It provides essential insight to inform marketing strategy and the success of brand campaigns by identifying influencers, relevant target groups and content that resonates.

Holistic view: Social channels are so widely used they can provide a full understanding of even small niche groups, and insights that enhance survey understanding.

Growing availability: In contrast to declining survey response rates, the use of social channels continues to grow.

Real involvement: People search with a purpose. Search trends provide an accurate reflection of fluctuations in category and topic engagement, and insight into the purchase journey.

Competitive context: Social conversations provide intelligence on competitor activity as well as your brand.

However, we believe the true value of social and search insight comes from using it to inform and complement traditional methods – and other new sources of behavioural insight.

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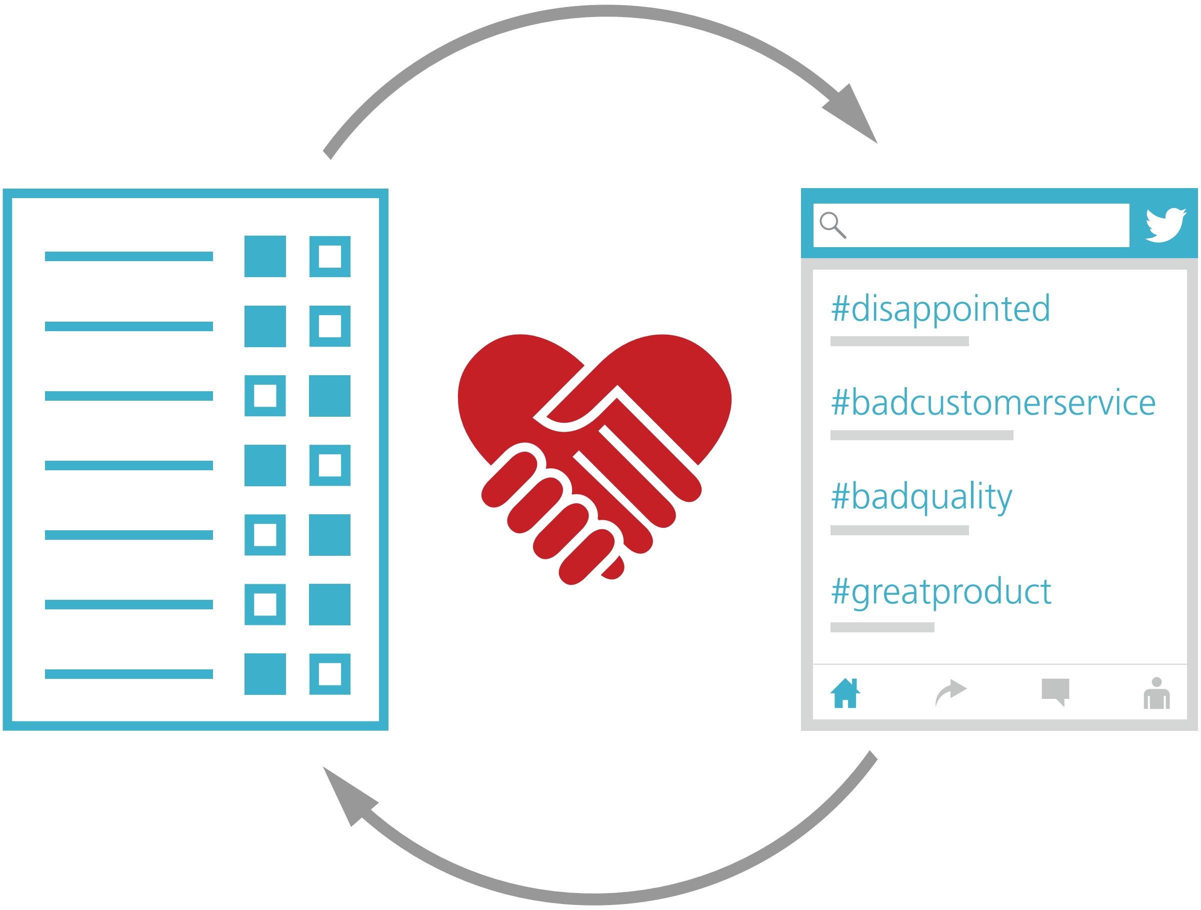
Chapter 2: Survey and social - the perfect match

At TNS, we believe the fusion of the authentic voice of consumers from social media with the robust, strategic direction of survey data provides the perfect match to inform successful brand, shopper, customer, innovation - and even government strategies.

Combining targeted social media insights with our validated traditional methods, we identify the real threats and opportunities for your brand throughout the customer journey. We can show you where problems occur, help you to define the right actions to solve them, and measure the impact of the solution.

The robustness of statistics and comparative benchmarks that traditional quantitative approaches provide gives the representative context for your category, and answers to specific questions you need to ask. With modelling techniques like driver analysis, we can frame the importance of the topics emerging through social. While social tells you what people are saying – survey tells you how important each topic is in the grand scheme of things.

And qualitative insight brings enhanced contextual understanding and recognises that needs and motivations don't operate in a vacuum - real behaviour is shaped by social, cultural, habitual and physical context. Qualitative analysis methods also recognise that much of human behaviour is habitual, or non-conscious, and that people don't always say what they mean or mean what they say. These methods draw from diverse expertise in psychology, cultural anthropology, semiotics and ethnography to probe beyond the stated words and literal meaning. They help us reveal deeper meanings by analysing the way language is used, the framing of ideas, and the use of metaphor, associations and connotations.



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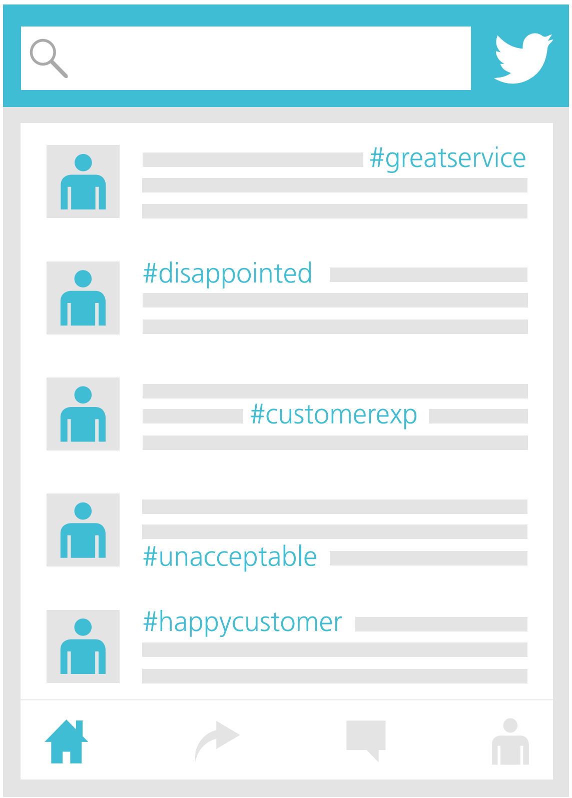
Chapter 3: Social insight in action

The more we work with social and search data, the more we see its value and applications. We use insights from social media for anything from early feedback on campaigns and product launches to predictive measures of equity and customer satisfaction.



We've used social media to help our clients to:

- Predict brand equity many weeks before tracking results are available
- Relate social trends to sales patterns, events and marketing spend
- Deep dive on topics raised through survey or other channels
- Provide early insights and flag emerging issues or opportunities
- Identify unmet needs to inform new product development
- Renovate tracking studies to provide more agile, predictive insights
- Shorten questionnaires by filling in gaps with social insight
- Rapidly evaluate the success of campaigns and product launches
- Understand the experience competitors' customers have
- Build successful and profitable customer relationships

And more…

Here are a few examples.

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Mercedes-Benz
@MercedesBenz

Welcome to Mercedes-Benz – stay informed and follow us. For technical assistance please contact your local dealer via mercedes-benz.com

Stuttgart, Germany
mercedes-benz.com/provider
Joined July 2009

8,168 Photos and videos

TWEETS 17.9K
FOLLOWING 647
FOLLOWERS 1.43M
FAVORITES 789
LISTS 7

Tweets
Tweets & replies
Photos & videos

Pinned Tweet
Mercedes-Benz @MercedesBenz · Oct 4
The #EClass Coupé & Cabriolet get a fresh new look this autumn. See what's getting polished: benz.me/majs2Hjf

204 381

Mercedes-Benz @MercedesBenz · 30m
Raise anchor & set sail with #MercedesBenz & @ATRacing99 aboard the fastest, lightest yacht in the Seven Seas.

In a perfect world you wouldn’t ask market researchers what your brand equity was one or two months ago. Nor would you only speak to those consumers who were willing to answer your survey. In a perfect world you would get a full picture of what is happening to your brand right now.

In order to test the power of our predictive tracking approach, we looked at the UK car market to see if our predictions would match historical equity and sales data.

We analysed data on the 21 most established brands, which included luxury vehicles like Mercedes-Benz and mainstream brands such as Vauxhall. By combining our social signals – in this case Twitter data – with brand mentions in print media, we were looking to prove that we could have identified brand equity movement before it happened.

We looked back at 17 months between March 2012 and August 2013 and built a model that was able to predict pretty much to the letter the brand equity for each manufacturer. But let’s be honest, everyone knows that brand equity in the automotive sector doesn’t shift too much. A far more challenging scenario was predicting sales over those months. Could we provide an analysis of social and search that could tell these manufacturers their likely number of sales over this period? If we could, then imagine the effect that would have on their capacity planning and media spend.

The simple answer was yes. We were able to do so in a matter of weeks and with greater accuracy. Traditional methods resulted in 72% accuracy, but our new approach ramped this up to 95%.

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Marketers: the future is ready for you now.

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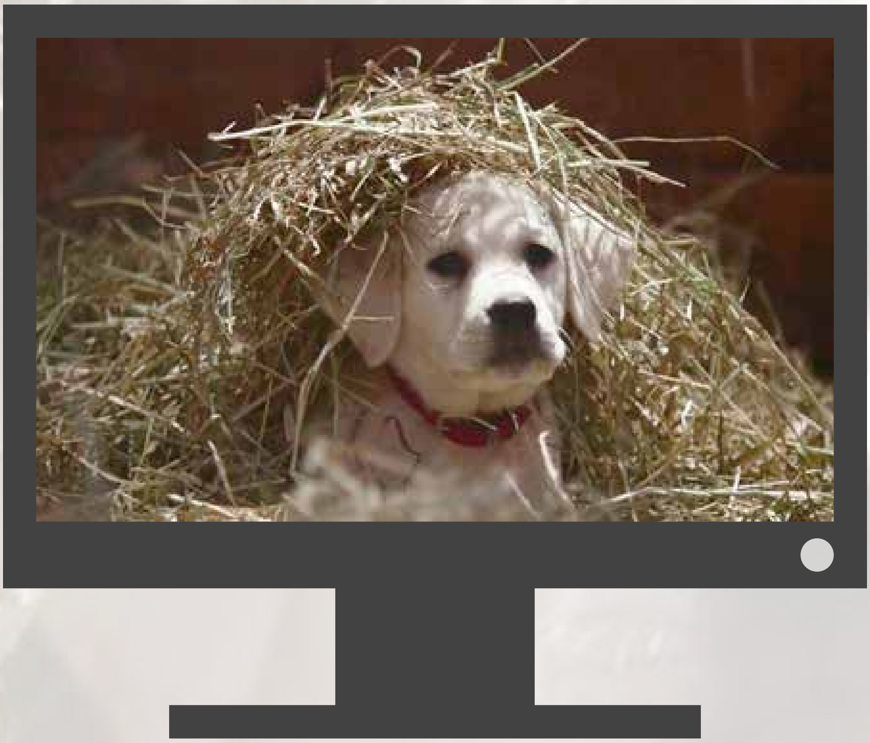

What does great marketing look like in the social media age? Why does one piece of activity set social platforms alight when another barely resonates? And what does it really mean for the brand when it does?

You needed deep pockets to run a TV ad during 2015's Super Bowl. The Oscars weren't cheap either. A 30-second spot during the American football showcase would have set you back $4.5m, while an ad in a break from the Hollywood extravaganza went for about half that.

A significant reason that brands like Budweiser and Dove spent that money was to generate social media engagement during a high profile event that can deliver significant reach. So what kind of bang did they get for their buck?

The maps and footprints from our Twitter analysis showed the Budweiser 'Lost Dog' ad scored the highest number of mentions (26%). But while the brand generated massive amplification, our research shows that much of this noise was around the cute novelty of the ad, rather than sustained engagement. While it might be remembered, it will not drive long-term interest in the brand.

Super Bowl viewer @SuperBowlviewer **1hr**
Budweiser's 'Lost Dog' Super Bowl commercial will melt your heart.

Over at the Oscars, Dove based its entire strategy around social media – focussing on the commentary around how women look on the red carpet. This aligned perfectly with its long running 'Real Beauty' campaign. Twitter analysis showed that this triggered responses from a range of influencers who shared or added to Dove's commentary on their own networks, resulting in greater and more authentic brand engagement.

The campaign execution around both events took different forms, and our ability to track and analyse it revealed quickly what was viewed as authentic and what was not.

You may also be interested in: Super Bowl vs Oscars: social media's winners revealed or Why real time marketers need a better radar.

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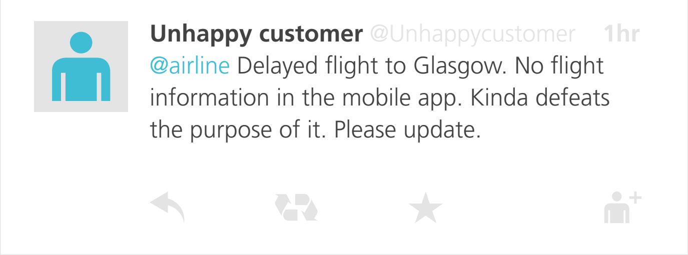
The sheer volume of conversations on social media represents a huge opportunity for companies to create closer, more meaningful customer relationships - but much of the buzz isn't relevant to building customer relationships.



Unhappy customer @Unhappycustomer 1hr
@airline Delayed flight to Glasgow. No flight information in the mobile app. Kinda defeats the purpose of it. Please update.

We analysed over 130,000 tweets about a global airline over three months and reduced the data by 63% by focusing on customer experience topics. We also interviewed 2,000 customers about their experiences and perceptions.

Certain stages of the journey generated more buzz than others; delayed flights created lots of negative buzz, whereas baggage drop-off was mentioned infrequently in a mostly neutral tone and the crew received the highest number of positive comments.

With an understanding of the importance of each journey stage from the survey, we looked at topics discussed on social media and their impact on the customer relationships.

While punctuality was a major cause of negative buzz, it was not a major driver of loyalty. Waiting in a departure lounge with free Wi-Fi and ready access to social networks disproportionally affected the volume of mentions.

Combined survey and social analysis identified three ways to improve customer experience around delays; information, flexibility in dealing with missed flights and compensation. Passengers with good experiences in these areas were four to six times more likely to recommend the airline.

While social provides a finger on the pulse for customer concerns and motivations, a robust survey framework provides the anchor for strong relationships.

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You're listening, but are you learning?

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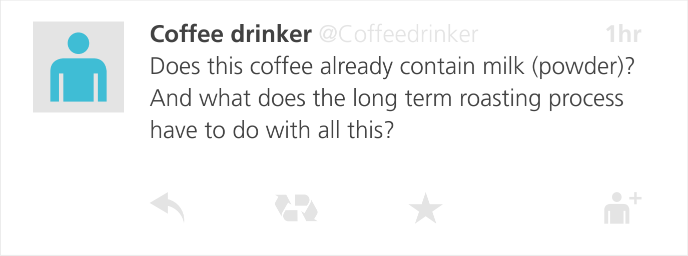
In today’s fragmented marketing environment, failure rates in innovation are higher than ever, and launching successful products an increasing challenge.

Early insights from social data can rapidly gauge reactions to a new product launch, in time to help inform its success.

We analysed over 3,800 conversations about an innovative coffee launch from Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, blogs, review sites and forums. We used our new product evaluation framework to provide a consistent perspective and concise interpretation of success drivers, as well as potential barriers to success.

Social insight quickly led us to understand that product awareness and availability were very good, but consumers didn’t understand the product benefits, or perceive it to be unique. This fundamental lack of clarity meant consumers didn’t recognise the product as exciting or relevant enough to overcome barriers to trial and usage.



Coffee drinker @Coffeedrinker 1hr

Does this coffee already contain milk (powder)? And what does the long term roasting process have to do with all this?

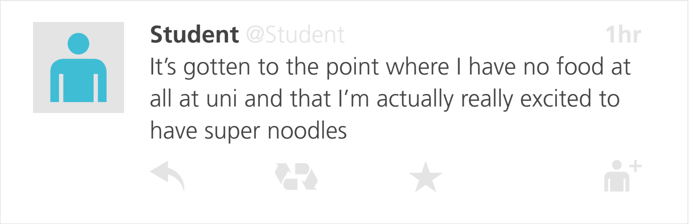
The speed and authenticity of consumer discussions from relevant social media mean we can give precise direction, very soon after launch, on how to improve the success of a launch by responding to discussions as they occur. This was a clear opportunity for the brand to revisit the launch messaging, and clarify the product benefits to build relevance and engage the target audience.

Beyond the volume of conversations taking place on social media, it's important to look at the deeper meaning to reveal people's needs, tensions and motivations. Qualitative analysis helps us to go beyond the stated words, looking at the way language is used to reveal the contexts in which people express their views.

Though not formally launched in the UK, an instant noodle brand was selling well in discounter stores. In order to help this global food manufacturer leverage this opportunity and define an optimal positioning, we used a mix of methods including social listening, cultural analysis, and focus groups.

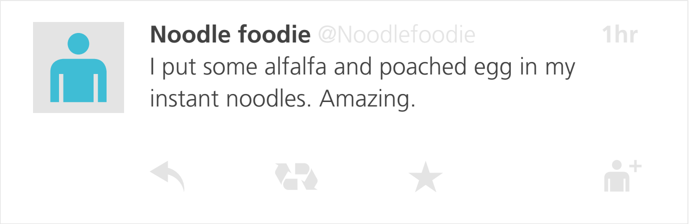
Social media helped us understand the overall character of conversations taking place about noodles. It highlighted the different roles noodles play across consumer groups: for people on low incomes, such as students, noodles are part of a lifestyle and an object of ridicule and banter, but at the same time something of a badge of honour. This contrasted with more elevated discussions among foodies on more authentic, higher quality noodles, where the exchanges were more about recipes, correct preparation and provenance.

The tensions between these two different types of users turned out to be the basis for powerful category insight, and pointed to potential positioning routes for our client to explore in further stages of the study.



Student @Student 1hr

It's gotten to the point where I have no food at all at uni and that I'm actually really excited to have super noodles



Noodle foodie @Noodlefoodie 1hr

I put some alfalfa and poached egg in my instant noodles. Amazing.

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Chapter 4: How to get it right

Although many companies have social listening in place, they often struggle to make sense of the mass of information, or to identify tangible actions from what they've heard.

Common social analytics, like the number of mentions in different social networks over time, and positive or negative sentiment, are useful first steps on the road to understanding. But they aren't focused enough to be of any long-term strategic use.

We've developed a way of cleaning and aggregating social and search data to isolate the content that's relevant to your brand, category or campaign. Whether used in isolation or blended with survey data, our new approaches don't just give you new insights, faster. They put you ahead of the competition.

Here are some of the things we've learned along the way.

Clear focus: Without a clear understanding of the business problem, social data mining can be a time-consuming fishing expedition. We focus our analyses on clear business questions from the start and know the optimal combination of social and survey to deliver the insights needed.

Noise: There is a lot of irrelevant content on social media and it can be hard to find the genuine conversations. So it is important to invest in a platform that is flexible enough to update best practice continually, and help deliver clean, category relevant data.

Coding: Social comments cover many topics – it can be challenging to accurately code at scale and quantify. Most categorisation engines used by social platforms are crude and lack accuracy. We've tried dozens of approaches over the years and have concluded that we need to de-couple the classification challenge from data collection, and have combined smart social sampling with crowd-sourced validation to provide the accuracy we need.

Insufficient data: Socially infused approaches are sometimes not viable due to the low volume of content. We use a structured evaluation process to assess whether social approaches will be informative – or whether budget is better spent elsewhere. For example, we invest in our Connected Life study (the world's most comprehensive study of consumer digital trends) to help determine platform audience sizes in different markets and the level of engagement different populations have.

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Chapter 4: How to get it right

Listening in the right places: In some markets and categories we need to access content from specific niche forums and blogs. To access as much information as possible, we take a portfolio approach to social data providers – using the best platform for the market / category combination, or working with providers who are able to custom scrape content to meet our requirements.

Localisation: Local idioms and language nuances can make it difficult to interpret social data properly. So, it is essential to include local language speakers to help the interpretation process. We now operate in over 80 markets, and having local market specialists who are provide true cultural and linguistic interpretation of social content is invaluable.

Consistency: Platforms have different source definitions, query engines and coverage, so for global projects you often need to work with multiple listening platforms to reflect each market properly. When possible, it is important to work to a single, consistent process so you can normalise data across multiple providers and sources.

Exaggerated opinions: People who express their opinions through social channels usually have an 'agenda' for doing so (i.e. to 'look good' to peers). We should therefore be careful in interpreting social comments as representing people's true opinions in all cases. While it is impossible to entirely overcome this challenge, through smart data cleaning (i.e. isolating and removing viral jokes where appropriate) and analytics, we ensure the content we analyse is as fit for purpose as possible.

Private conversations: Many social conversations now take place on closed forums that social listening platforms can't access, like WhatsApp or WeChat. This can present a challenge when exploring specific markets or segments. However, there is a gradual movement towards more openness from these networks, and we are lucky to be a part of WPP, who are well placed to negotiate access to these currently 'closed shop' data sources. For example, our partnership with Facebook allows us to peak over these walled gardens – although the data is aggregated to be privacy compliant, it still provides great insight.

But social insight is not a universal panacea. Looking at a wall of social data is a waste of time unless you know what you're looking for and why.

Social insight works best when combined with validated qualitative and quantitative models and methods that provide context and a framework for interpretation and analysis. By linking up with survey insight, one methodology benefits the other.
The whole is definitely greater than the sum of the parts. Now 1+1=3.

The future is data agnostic.

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How we can help you?

While social listening represents a great source of information, finding relevant and actionable insights can be a time-consuming challenge. We've learned a lot about its potential, and how to find the real nuggets, and we're still learning. But we strongly believe that used in the right way it provides fast, genuine and responsive direction that can inform many business decisions.

Whether you subscribe to a social listening platform or not, we'd love to talk to you about how you can bring out the best from your social media and search data.

Get in touch

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About TNS
TNS advises clients on specific growth strategies around new market entry, innovation, brand switching and customer strategies, based on long-established expertise and market-leading solutions. With a presence in over 80 countries, TNS has more conversations with the world's consumers than anyone else and understands individual human behaviours and attitudes across every cultural, economic and political region of the world.

TNS is part of Kantar, the data investment management division of WPP and one of the world's largest insight, information and consultancy groups.

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