

# Listen Up

**B**ig Data brings with it concerns of Big Brother and lost privacy. However, plenty of highly admired companies use Big Data and millions of consumers enjoy the benefits. Amazon, Spotify and Netflix use Big Data to help us discover books, music and movies we might enjoy. Baseball teams use Big Data to win more games and delight their fans. Google uses Big Data to help us find whatever it is we might be looking for.

These brands get it. They use everything they can to personalize the experience and engage their customers. Big Data can do great things.

## The biggest insights can be heard in small data.

Yet few companies—from large global corporations to small Silicon Valley startups—have found meaningful ways to harness all of that data and use it to improve the brand experience for their customers.

Some face constraints such as distribution systems that separate them from the point of sale. Others have hired consultants to create elaborate Big Data blueprints that they can't afford to use. Many have multiple legacy systems that generate independent and isolated data about their customers that can't be readily synthesized into applicable insights.

With so much available data, it is easy to understand why so many companies feel paralyzed. A few, however, are beginning to make headway by looking at the data differently. They have stripped away the Big Data noise and focused instead on the smaller insights, the clear signals emitted by Little Data.

In a way, Little Data is to Big Data what niche media are to mass media. Where Big Data is the mass of information generated by billions of sources, Little Data takes the data set down to a more personal level. The fitness bands used by so many to collect information about their daily activities provide one example.

These devices and the intensely personalized data sets they collect provide users with an understanding of which daily behaviors are healthiest. The resulting

intelligence helps improve the user's daily life.

Translating this kind of approach to a business context starts with an analysis of objectives and the identification of which data are most likely to achieve them. Understanding your customer's buying behavior usually represents the logical starting point. Fortunately, the proliferation of digital and social media provides the ability to capture this kind of data and provide more precise and meaningful insights.

Where are the best opportunities throughout the customer lifecycle to collect Little Data that can build a stronger relationship? Just as a fitness band tracks customer movement and behavior, the customer journey can identify activities that can be leveraged to improve the brand experience and tighten customer engagement. Social networks provide an ideal platform for this type of data collection because they generate Little Data in real time, while customers are on the move. Big Data, by comparison, tends to be an aggregate of past behavior.

### SOCIAL LISTENING FOR LITTLE DATA

Social networks enable conversations and provide the invaluable capabilities to identify a brand's 'super fans.' They provide an opportunity to develop understanding without necessarily selling, or even communicating, anything. Ideas can be developed based on these conversations, which reveal true feelings, and with them, real insights into the brand experience.

Social networks have brought conversations, feelings and experiences relevant to corporations into the open for the first time. These, in turn, allow us to form insights into all manner of important areas, such as what people need, what makes them laugh, which words resonate or what they share.

Listening requires work, though, and it must be accompanied by a plan actually to use the data collected. There's something of a human art to it because ultimately it's about people.

To illustrate, when we hire new account staff, one of the first things we do is ask them to look at a video of a meeting and then describe what happened. They scribble out their notes from the meeting but frequently miss all of the nuances. It is the unsaid but meaningful language and the side conversations that provide true value.



## Quality vs. Quantity

*Little Data gleaned from sites your customers visit, what they download, like, share, and talk about can provide greater insights into their brand experience than the fire hose of Big Data. Social listening can be a great source of Little Data, but requires hard work and discretion.*

- Define the business goals and key performance indicators.
- Set a baseline for the existing buzz for your brand experience.
- Decide which aspects of social media should be monitored.
- Select the right social-listening tools (hundreds are available).
- Recognize that social networks are a two-way channel that demands you reach out to encourage engagement and satisfaction.
- Iterate, evolve and scale.

Similarly, listening in the social space requires diligence. In some cases, what we think we hear is not really what is being said. *The New York Times* recently published a story about insights that are often missed in the tracking of online comments about certain topics, such as automotive defects. The analysis proved useless unless it was expressly designed to find the words people use when reporting a defect.

We most readily tune our social listening into those who are either venting or bragging about something; analysts leap on strongly emotional words. However, this approach misses much because, perhaps surprisingly, people often show little emotion when reporting a defect.

What kinds of words do people actually use when reporting a problem with your brand experience? Researchers at Virginia Tech call these clues ‘smoke words’ because they smoke out, or truly reveal the meaning beyond the words. In the case of automotive defects, this kind of insight could save lives. Closer to home, it could save your brand.

It’s also important to remember that a brand is not a ‘friend.’ A brand is something a consumer might like at a particular moment until something better comes along. It might serve a purpose and be something with which a consumer identifies, but it is not necessarily a ‘member’ of the community. It is a visitor. Caution dictates that we understand this reality and focus on the most relevant conversations.

### LISTEN FOR THE NUANCES

In the past, marketers derived most of their insights from walking the aisles in the supermarket, spiffing beers at a local tavern, or massive numbers of focus groups. This never quite removed the influences of peer pressure or got to an understanding of what goes through a customer’s mind at any given point during his or her path to purchase.

Was it the low price (three days until payday)? The label (new or interesting)? A favorite brand (sticking with what is comfortable)? Something different (a

friend suggested I try it)? Advertising (I remember seeing this)? Perceptions and status (what will others think of me)?

Let’s say we are seeking insights into a 42-year-old female wine drinker. What we have learned from social listening has broadened an understanding of how she and her friends experience wine. Who would have thought that book clubs would be a common touchstone for this consumer?

In the Big Data world, if we were trying to expand our wine brand’s visibility

to this consumer’s younger 36-year-old sister, it might be difficult to understand why she rejects her older sister’s selection. With social listening (i.e., Little Data), we can discover a more relevant context in which to position the brand experience for success.

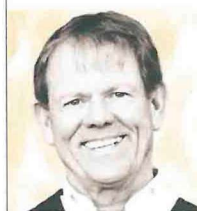
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If you have 500 data points of interaction about a customer, how would you know which ones really matter? If you had more—which is what Big Data is all about—would you be better off?

What if you just had a few data points, but they were incredibly insightful about your brand experience? Does Big Data get at what is truly relevant?

Conversations taking place within social media allow us to understand how our messages are being received, how the nuance of positioning is being interpreted and, often as important, issues and preferences not being addressed by other communications.

Little Data can be intimate and insightful because, if you are invited in, it brings you closer to the customer, near the signal and away from the noise. ■



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