The evaluation of social media marketing campaigns: an exploratory study

Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count
and everything that counts, cannot necessarily be counted.

(Atributed to Albert Einstein: Theoretical Physicist)

Introduction
This paper reports an exploratory small-scale study into the approaches adopted by digital marketing agencies to evaluate the effect or impact of social media (SM) marketing campaigns. The Web 2.0 digital arena offers many possibilities for the evaluation of marketing campaigns, since it is relatively easy to generate a wide range of ‘performance statistics’ through web analytical software. However, the researcher’s experience in the sector suggests that there is variation in practice and that in some cases, whilst evaluation reports are created, the data is not used to inform decision making regarding further campaigns. In addition, whilst there are a number of premium, subscription based automated software systems (e.g. Radian6, Brandwatch) which attempt to measure and evaluate SM marketing campaigns, widespread dissatisfaction amongst practitioners and commercial commentators (E-Consultancy, 2010) and excessive licence fees (that are a significant barrier to smaller agencies) suggest that the industry would benefit from further investigation into SM evaluation methods.

Aims and Objectives
It is the aim of this study to explore and understand the approaches to the evaluation of SM marketing employed by digital marketing agencies. In order to gain an understanding into approaches of this nature, the research objectives for this project are as follows:

1. To profile the evaluation processes and techniques used by digital marketing agencies to evaluate SM campaigns
2. To gain an understanding of the drivers that affect the selection and design of these processes
3. To gather practitioners’ perspectives on the relative merits and limitations of the approaches that they have adopted
4. To explore the relationship between agency size and the adopted evaluation approach
5. To offer recommendations to enhance practice regarding the evaluation of SM campaigns

This paper next reviews the previous research and theoretical context for this study. This is followed by an outline of the research methods, and, an indicative summary of potential outcomes from the research.

Literature Review:
The development of SM platforms and their inherent user interaction was comprehensively explored by Boyd & Ellison (2008) who concluded that consumers of SM can “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p.1). Seen to be a derivative of what is classed as the second generation of the internet, commonly referred to as Web2.0 (O'Reilly & Constantinides, 2009), SM is rapidly asserting itself as an important modern cultural facet. Wide availability of high speed broadband provision coupled with a multitude of web-enabled mobile devices means that the average UK web user spends more time on Facebook than any other site with 16.2% of all time spent online (ComScore, 2011)

Since their customers and audiences are on SM, marketers have developed techniques to actively promote or raise awareness of their brands on these platforms, extending relationship marketing into this new arena (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).
Despite this growing interest in SM, in general, and amongst marketers, in particular, and SM’s potential as an effective communications medium, research in this area is still limited. Such research as has been conducted mostly takes a consumer or societal perspective, covering topics such as the inclusion of SM in the classroom (Granitz & Koernig, 2011), and the influence of SM on teenagers (Kelly, Kerr, & Drennan 2010). With a few notable exceptions, there is limited work on the digital marketing practitioners’ approach to SM campaigns.

The study of the evaluation of SM campaigns fits within the wider arena of the measurement and evaluation of the effectiveness of digital marketing and advertising. It is commonplace for digital practitioners to quantify metrics for campaign performance, typically via a penultimate action of the campaign cycle. Within the digital sphere, search engine advertising systems (e.g. Google Analytics) in conjunction with html tracking can manipulate immense volumes of data. However, SM platforms generate data of a distinctly different format to that associated with display advertising; highly semantic data is produced by the activity on SM platforms generally bound loosely by the term ‘engagement’ (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Two key works on SM marketing evaluation are those of Murdough (2010) who looked at SM measurement as a construct, and Cruz & Fill (2008) who explored the evaluation of viral marketing through practitioner enquiry. Both inform the research approach adopted in this study. Murdough’s (2010) model of the social media measurement process (Figure 1) embed measurement in a strategic model of SM marketing. Cruz & Fill’s (2008) methodological approach in their work on viral marketing has also helped to shape the approach adopted in this study; they identified performance metrics from the academic literature and employing semi-structured interviews with selected industry practitioners. Finally, Broom et al (2011) concluding their investigation into work on the relative return on investment of SM, asserts that research covering practitioner approaches to SM marketing is sparse.

![Figure 1: Social Media Measurement Process](image)

**Research Design**

This paper presents a small-scale exploratory study in an area in which there has previously been limited research. Accordingly, a qualitative approach has been adopted using semi-structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2011) in order to explore practitioner attitudes, experiences and opinions when dealing with SM. The questions were open-ended thus not limiting the respondents/interviewees choice of answers (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). The purpose was to provide a setting where the
Interviewer and interviewees could discuss the topic in depth (Creswell, 2007). Questions covered the following four main areas:

1. Key informants professional profile, including: role, career, involvement with SM campaigns and their evaluation.
2. Agency profile, including: size, range of clients and campaigns, profile of experience with SM campaigns (both stand alone and multi-channel)
3. Profile of two or three key recent SM campaigns, including: client, sector, objectives, message, media, audience, budget, and negotiation, development and design processes.
4. SM campaign evaluation, including: the methods of evaluation used, and the decision processes that determine the measurement approach and tools.

All questions were supplemented with a number of prompts, which the interviewer used as necessary to ensure coverage of key themes. In addition, the opportunity was left open to explore unanticipated topics and themes.

Participants were all practitioners in marketing agencies involved with SM campaigns. This was consistent with the broad aim of this study to understand practitioner’s decisions and approaches to evaluation. One practitioner was selected as a key informant for each of a number of agencies. Agencies were selected on the basis of their involvement in SM campaigns, and their accessibility to the research. Within each agency a key informant was identified who had either practical or managerial involvement with SM campaigns. Many of these agencies are relatively small, so it is often the case that there is typically one practitioner who is well-versed in the SM area. Identification of agencies and contact with key informants was facilitated by the researcher’s existing industry relationships through a local trade association, although it should be noted that agencies and practitioners alike will be anonymised in subsequent iterations of the research.

Interviews were conducted either in person in the participants workplace, or via Skype alongside its partner recording software, Pamela. Given the deadline dominated working nature of the participants, it was important to be flexible as to the interview arrangements to suit the needs of the participants. It is estimated that between thirty minutes to an hour shall be needed for interviews.

Potential outcomes
It is anticipated that by the time of the AM Conference the data for this study will have been collected and analysis completed, and that it will be possible to present some key findings. The data collected will reveal the range of different approaches adopted by the case study digital marketing agencies in their evaluation of SM campaigns, and provide some context and rationale for the approaches adopted. It is anticipated that practices will range from very basic evaluation, to complex systematised approaches to evaluation, and that the involvement of clients in specifying evaluation will also vary. The interviews will also offer insights into the impact of client base, involvement with clients, the campaign process, decision making processes and the availability of software reporting tools.
References


