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Monitoring conversation is a good start

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A product launch is a prime opportunity to track online dialogue.

In an increasingly digital world where more purchasing decisions are being influenced by Internet postings, effective monitoring is an indispensable component of the product launch.

For example, when the US Treasury Department Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) recently unveiled the redesigned $5 bill, Burson-Marsteller's strategy included participating in online dialogue around US currency. The team used such tactics as developing social media profiles, user-generated media monitoring, and proactive blog responses when appropriate.

In one instance, an influential blogger commented on BEP's live launch event and the fact there had been some technical glitches.

"This post was picked up near immediately by the blog monitoring efforts, and the client was able to post a response apologizing for the technical glitches, but also speaking to the immense interest in new currency," says Erin Byrne, Burson's chief digital strategist.

The blogger quickly responded, saying it was a wonderful event and commending the BEP for the digital unveiling.

"Companies need to move beyond only monitoring to monitoring and response," Byrne says. "Knowing what is being said about you provides an [opening] to participate - proactively to extend a conversation or add an additional perspective, or reactively to set the record straight."

To get started, Byrne recommends getting familiar with many monitoring tools offered on free online sites, such as Technorati and Blogpulse, to paid solutions from companies like Converseon and Visible Technologies.

Toyota's Scion used Nielsen BuzzMetrics to gauge consumer reaction to the re-designed 2008 xB, which received mixed reviews after its launch date last April.

BuzzMetrics reported what consumers - including new owners - were saying about the vehicle on blogs,

message boards, and other online platforms, months before survey information would be available.

Through proprietary sentiment analysis, BuzzMetrics reassured Scion that consumers do view the xB as a polarizing, not mainstream, vehicle thanks in part to Scion's marketing campaign and vehicle styling, which was a key objective.

"[A] new product launch is a sweet spot for buzz monitoring because buzz begins to build as soon as consumers learn about a new product, whether it is a new vehicle debuting or a new electronic device," says Sandra Parrelli, marketing manager at Nielsen BuzzMetrics.

However, an open-ended objective makes it difficult for the client to determine the success of the program, Parrelli says.

"Strategically, it is important for the client to have at least one critical business question that they want their online buzz monitoring to address," Parrelli adds. "This will provide the client with some measure of whether their buzz monitoring is successful, or not."

Whether it is a pre-launch campaign, an immediate post-launch effort, or an ongoing PR program, PR practitioners who want to invest in a paid service for online monitoring should ask some hard questions, says Gail Nelson, SVP of marketing at BurrellesLuce.

This includes ascertaining how many online news sources and blogs are covered, if there is a way to filter out mere mentions and other extraneous information, and if the provider gathers online content from not only free, but subscription-based sources.

The best online monitoring solutions have a robust technology infrastructure supported by seasoned analysts with verifiable experience in your industry who can translate findings into actionable insight, she says.

And, Nelson adds, the combination of advanced search technologies and human intelligence ensures the highest degree of accuracy in online monitoring, performed at the lowest possible cost in time and money.

Stephen Debruyn, Cision's VP of marketing, agrees that while technology is powerful, the human factor is also key. To gain needed insight in how to best leverage the technology, Debruyn suggests first tackling search engines and blog-ranking services.

"The more you work with the basic tools, the better you will get," he says. "It's important to learn as much as you can about key words and effective search techniques."

Technique tips

Do
Conduct extensive research to select the right search terms to identify chatter
Be transparent when responding to negative posts
Develop a plan to address key findings

Don't
Start spending money before defining key objectives
Hire a company that doesn't have verifiable expertise in your industry
Panic over every single negative post