

Mining Your Own Business

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The Web is a ubiquitous, timeless presence. From the moment your organization launched its first Web presence, you entered into a world of new rules. You no longer control when or in what context the rest of the world sees your organization. You cannot filter who comes to your site. You've lost some of the control you had over your messaging and your market. Conversely, you also have timeless — continuous — exposure to members, potential members, and the public. You have access to a universal audience, and you can market far beyond your historical reach. You have tools and the capacity to glean a level of understanding about your industry and members that — up until now — was logistically impossible or cost prohibitive.

If your organization takes a snapshot of members once a year at the annual convention or through a biannual survey, then you may only understand how your members think, feel, or react on that single day in history. With the Internet you have a virtually limitless, economical, and continuous opportunity to gather information about your audience. And you can, over time, acquire more qualified information. The better information you have, the more you can understand your market, and the more effectively you can make business strategy and resource allocation decisions to do the following:

- Be responsive to the most active subscribers
- Launch targeted member recruitment and retention campaigns
- Offer relevant products and services
- Deploy technology and Web enhancements that are desired by your online constituency

There are a wide variety of Internet tools that have profound value in market research. This article offers a different way of looking at some common Web tools, many of which support goals of delivering content,

fostering community, or promoting activities. While not an exhaustive list of options, consider how these everyday tools can serve your market research agenda and support organizational decision-making.

Web Statistics

There is a wealth of information buried in your Web traffic reports. Unfortunately, few executives see these reports and of those who do, even fewer know how to translate the mountain of raw data into business intelligence. That's not surprising. The data compilations were not designed for an executive to read, and frankly, they often yield a lot of irrelevant information. But the reports can be customized to extract relevant information in a summary format. The key — as in any research project — is to know what questions to ask and to understand what the tool can provide.

Is member recruitment your business challenge? Then you may want to focus on data that describes how often new visitors come to your site, what content they seek, how long they stay, and what activities they perform (such as downloading information, inquiring about benefits, or scanning the course catalog, for example). Are you looking to promote more of your association products? Web reports can help assess what type of online visitor is more likely to make a purchase and what patterns of behavior precede the purchasing decision. This type of trend analysis and pattern recognition can help you understand your online visitor and then respond with more of the information and services they seek. If you've never reviewed a Web Trends or WebAlyzer report, take a weekend and plow through one. Then determine the research questions you have and information needed to support organizational goals. If past behavior is the best predictor of future performance, then Web reports need to be on your required reading list.

Surveys

Associations have a long history of conducting surveys. The typical model for member surveying is the once-a-year paper forms included in a publication or a separate mailing issued to all members in the database. Regardless of the size of the survey population, this is

an expensive endeavor and often doesn't yield a high response rate. Online surveys offer new value. While there may be some convenience to the survey population — the ease of clicking their way through the questionnaire — the more significant economies are realized by the hosting organization. Online surveys are inexpensive to disseminate, offer control over the type and format of responses, and automatically collate results. In addition to streamlining the process and offering a lower-cost solution, online surveys also can be created to segment the audience. The respondent who checks "member" might be offered a different set of questions than the respondent who checks "former member" receives. Imagine how valuable this segmentation of results can be. Online surveys require a special set of skills, so make sure your marketing team includes a market researcher who is savvy about online technologies.

Surveys support market research by giving detailed demographic and psychographic information about individuals. If you can successfully lead the target population to complete the survey, you can begin constructing a profile of your membership's backgrounds, needs, and issues. The downside of surveys is that they often require a level of disclosure about an individual's identity, which results in people giving answers they think you want to hear or that make them look more favorable. Survey data is most powerful when juxtaposed against some of the following tactics.

Polls

Polls differ from surveys in that a poll is usually much more brief, targeted, and anonymous. A poll is intended to get a pulse on an issue or question without the burden of being qualified research. Polling technology can be straightforward or sophisticated. The key to good polling is keeping it simple, timely, and relevant. Online visitors are very receptive to short polls, especially if the results of the poll are immediately fed back to the visitor. Take MSNBC or CNN, for example. Their response rate on various public opinion polls is extraordinarily high. In fact, some sites have such active participation that the polls are what keep people coming back.

Because public reception of polls is greater than that of surveys, consider how your organization might garner valuable intelligence through a series of polls instead of through one large survey. Polls have enormous flexibility and can be posted on a Web site in a matter of minutes. Assume some late-breaking news story has direct bearing on your industry. In minutes your organization can post a poll to gather real-time feedback from members on this issue. Not only have you capitalized on a critical moment in your organizational history, but you've also reinforced to members that your organization is timely and relevant.

Voting

Technologically, voting is no different from polling. The difference lies in what is done with the information. With polling, people expect that you are gathering data, sometimes purely to obtain information. With voting, they expect that you are going to act on the results. You want to be clear with onsite visitors about when it's a poll and when it's a vote.

One organization that sought member input on the aesthetic design of their Web site actually posted a series of thumbnail images and asked the members to vote on the rendering they preferred. The winning image became the design for their site. Can you even imagine asking your membership about design using traditional means? By controlling the options and offering a simple selection format, this organization was able to put this decision up for democratic vote, giving the membership a heightened sense of input and ownership.

Chat

Chat rooms, or simply "Chat," have a rather undeserved reputation. Like any tool, it can be misused. Consider the attributes of Chat technology and how those attributes support the overall marketing strategy. Chat offers real-time communication among a group of people. This can be an open or closed group. The conversation can be free-flowing or moderated. The transcript of the conversation can be temporal or saved. For anyone who has used Chat, they soon learn that it works best in small groups, for a defined period of time, on a specific and controlled topic. Notice how that parallels what is

traditionally done in focus groups — a gathering of individuals convening at a given time to express their opinions or ideas on a subject. If it is logistically difficult or expensive to convene members for a focus group, try hosting an online focus group. In fact, online Chat is being used more often by the commercial sector as a vehicle for conducting online brainstorming sessions and virtual focus groups. In a recent Fast Company article on Proctor & Gamble, they reported "by doing a [marketing] test online, we can do it for one-tenth of the cost in one-quarter of the time."

Imagine your organization has drafted a position paper on some legislation. You want to hear from chapter presidents on how the locals will react. You can use e-mail to invite the leadership to a scheduled chat and control who joins the group by their login. Someone from your staff serves as moderator to guide the online discussion and keep the attendees focused. The activity may take no more than an hour of their time, without the disruption of travel or time out of the office. You can save the transcript of the discussion and cull through it for summary points. In addition to gathering valuable input on this position statement, you have also reinforced your relationship with the local leadership by giving them a voice and offering a convenient platform for them to interact with one another.

Discussion Groups

Also known as a message board, bulletin board service (BBS), and threaded discussion, a discussion group allows visitors of a site to post messages for other visitors or reply to a posting that is already present. This creates an asynchronous dialogue of members. Boards can be established by topic or can form into sub-conversations based on following a discussion thread.

Consider coupling polling questions with a discussion board for an even more comprehensive strategy. Members can cast their opinion in the poll and see how others have responded (thereby providing numeric data), and then you can invite them to express their thoughts further in the related discussion group (giving you anecdotal support for the poll).

External Surveys

You may be looking for market research outside your existing population in order to support attracting new members or defining new products. The difficulty in surveying an external population is that it's hard to isolate the subset you want, and they usually need some incentive for participating. But the Web reaches an infinite and ever-growing number of people from all walks of life. With the economies of online surveying and the vastness of the Web's distribution, external surveys may be more of an option. A third-party vendor can manage online surveying. One such vendor, Insight, sends out surveys to the general online population through advertising agency networks. In other words, Insight sends out banner ads that appear on sites that the target population frequents. The banner invites people to respond to a survey. Given how much people like to give their opinion, this company hasn't had any trouble getting responses — and to date they haven't had to pay for survey participation.

Public Discussion Groups

Have you ever wondered what's being said about your organization when you're not around? Or if there are trends and innovations you might be missing? Try mining some of the online public discussion groups or newsgroups. There are over 230 Yahoo! discussion groups under the topic of fundraising alone. Visit Yahoo! Groups (www.groups.yahoo.com) to see if there is a group related to your organization or industry.

Public boards are no different from the discussion groups mentioned earlier, with the exception that boards posted within your site inherently filter out a segment of the population and may skew what is actually posted. Public boards attract a diverse profile of people and include the dialogue that people will have about you when they don't expect you to be around. Public boards are rigorously mined by consumer products companies specifically looking for customer complaints (and praise) as well as ideas for future innovations.

A new type of software, yet to hit the mainstream, can review and analyze thousands of comments in newsgroups, listserves, and message boards and can

generate a summary of trends and themes. Microsoft is currently developing its Netscan tool, which indexes discussion groups to find the most active conversational threads, identify thought leaders, and determine how messages spread from one group to another. Imagine someday being able to know who is "leading the pack" in terms of your online reputation.

Summary

The good news is that there is a goldmine of information on the Internet, just for the asking. Deploying a few common tools with a specific marketing intent can give a much broader and deeper understanding of your target population — not only who they are but how they feel about you and what they want from your organization. These tools are relatively inexpensive, not difficult (albeit time-consuming) to manage, and easy to use. The management decision you have to make is to devote the time and human resources to managing and mining these resources. This can be a powerful way of gathering intelligence about your industry, trends, and public perceptions. You will get the results you desire if your attention to market research is — like the Internet — continuous.