



Ford tracks online consumer discussion with BrandIntel

The Internet has become an invaluable means of gathering unsolicited consumer comments for the automotive industry. As reliance on discussion forums grows, Ford has made the job of monitoring consumer-generated content online an integral part of its daily activities. Not only has this allowed Ford to “hear” online consumers, it has also provided the company with the ability to identify and proactively address any potential issues that could have a negative impact on the brand reputation.

An untapped research market

In 2004 Ford decided it was time to start tracking the growing proliferation of online consumer-generated content. As Michael Harper, US Performance Tracking Manager for Ford explains, “We recognized online consumer-generated content was an area we wanted to better understand and realized it was an area in which we could influence public perception of our company.”

While Ford’s consumer market research activities are significant overall, it has largely been based on traditional research (i.e. tracking studies, focus groups, etc.). “We realized there was a lot being said online that was simply not being measured in our current processes,” says Harper.

Consumer-generated content on the Web has become an increasingly important influencer of buying decisions. There are thousands of forums created by auto enthusiasts, industry analysts and consumer spokespersons that can be read by an infinitely larger number of visitors. Added to that are a number of other non-automotive sites that play an active role in influencing consumer thought. While most online discussion focuses on current topics, Ford has learned that many sites leave threads active that were initiated years ago. Some consumers don’t take note of the last post date and if these issues, which may have been resolved years ago, are read by potential Ford customers, they may have a negative impact on Ford’s reputation and the customer’s buying decision.

“A lot of people like to read and talk about cars,” says Harper. “Studies have shown that up to 20 people read blogs but never post anything themselves. That represents a lot of consumer feedback that is overlooked in research. We needed to see what others were seeing out there.”

Tracking and engaging with BrandIntel

After having done a number of research projects on an ad hoc basis, Ford realized that the insight into consumer online feedback was proving invaluable. In 2006, Ford began tracking consumer-generated content on a regular basis and in 2007, enlisted BrandIntel as the company’s chosen supplier. The initial goal of the project was to “listen and learn” – Ford simply wanted to know what was being said about the company, its brands and its vehicles online.

Beginning in mid-2007, Ford took the next step by actually engaging online consumers and directly interacting with them under the screen name fomocona. Ford representatives “talk” to consumers on prominent sites such as autoblog.com, townhall-talk.edmunds.com, and blueovalforum.com.

“We quickly discovered that in tracking online content, we could not only find what people were reading and saying, but we could also take our research to the next level and correct misconceptions by directly interacting online with consumers,” explains Harper. “If there is a quality issue for example, we can help direct customers to the right places to get their problems resolved. This lets them know that Ford cares and helps us reinforce the company’s good reputation.”

“When we first started the engagement part of this project, we thought we would simply be in a ‘defensive’ mode and be addressing service issues on Ford products,” says Harper. “Our aim was to reach out to that customer base through postings and assist them in resolving those issues. We were really surprised that there were a lot of ‘offensive’ opportunities that we could use in our product development and marketing planning.”



Ford understood that not all consumer-generated content is relevant; therefore, the ability to filter and score only relevant comments is critical. “The human tagging element was a key factor in our decision to go with BrandIntel,” says Harper. “Other suppliers only provide computer scoring and categorization and we ended up with a lot of irrelevant data. By adding the human aspect, the information we get is more relevant, targeted and useful. We absolutely needed that level of business intelligence in order to make sure the data we were looking at was relevant and viewed in the right context.”

BrandIntel provides customized weekly, monthly and quarterly reports to the Global Market Research department, Ford Public Affairs, Ford of Europe and Ford Customer Service Division. Reports focus on consumer discussion surrounding brand and vehicle lines, new vehicle launches, marketing campaigns, SYNC, (in-car communications and entertainment system) and top executives. Information from the reports is then forwarded to specific departments based on their functional areas to be used in conjunction with traditional research for decision-making purposes. As the partnership has developed, Global Market Research has worked closely with BrandIntel and internal departments within Ford to find ways to fully utilize the potential of consumer-generated content.

About BrandIntel

BrandIntel translates consumer-generated content into predictive consumer insight through a combination of proprietary technology, iterative human analysis and proven best practices. Using its unique methodology, BrandIntel provides visibility into consumer discussions online and delivers market intelligence that extends beyond traditional research by capturing spontaneous, relevant and emotional content. Through this process, BrandIntel clients get actionable recommendations that can be used to capture market share, boost brand equity and manage market reputation. BrandIntel clients are Fortune 1000 companies that span a cross-section of industries, including automotive, media and entertainment, financial services and life sciences. BrandIntel is headquartered in Canada, and has offices across North America.

For more information: www.brandintel.com