

Hear, Hear

How the best companies are succeeding by listening.

BY NICHOLAS WEBB

CREATIVITY is overrated. There, we said it. Conventional wisdom has been that a company's success depends on its innovation and creative genius. Indeed, the United States Patent and Trademark Office issues more than 3,000 patents each week. Yet only about 1 percent of those ideas reach successful commercialization. Why? Because innovation is the easy part. Creating technologies, products, and services that people actually want is what separates the moguls from the noodlers. How then do we learn what is relevant to the consumer? The simple yet remarkably profound answer is, by listening.

In fairness, listening has long been a staple of corporate success, but in the digital and new-media revolution it has become the most



Useful Earful
Companies can now better echo customer likes.

important implement in the business toolbox. At any given moment, there is a loud chorus of online conversation about a company's brand. And if that company isn't listening to the chatter—be it good or bad—it's missing out on huge opportunities for growth.

Businesses have been making serious changes in how they manage the Internet and social media

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platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The days of carefully vetted press releases, a polished brand image, and corporate separatism are over. Also gone are the

rampant focus groups and surveys intended to tap customer thought. The transformation has been so complete that companies no longer own their message; rather, the message is shaped by rapidly growing and vociferous online communities. For some businesses, particularly those accustomed to controlling the message, it's a scary phenomenon; for others, it's manna from heaven.

Kodak, like many other corporations, began exploring digital communications with a blog (even if, somewhat infamously, the maker of legendary film products was behind the curve when it came to embracing pixel-based photographic technology). Regarding the potency of social media, the company "quickly realized it was important to be a digital player," says Thomas Hoehn, Kodak's director of Interactive Marketing and Convergence Media. Initially, most Kodak-brand mentions were appearing on blog platforms, but in 2009, the name began popping up on Twitter. By 2010, there were more than 500 million impressions for the term "Kodak" on Twitter alone. That was when Kodak executives realized it was time for a fully engaged digital initiative—and the first Chief Listening Officer was born.

Beth LaPierre, Kodak's current CLO, describes the online platforms she monitors as being "like a huge focus group, only better." Participants are not stuck in an airless room, where they may or may not feel free to offer up brutally honest feedback. On Facebook and Twitter, they can discuss issues on their own terms, which often leads to more constructive

criticism. LaPierre's responsibility is to monitor and participate in those online forums, and then make use of comments and complaints to improve Kodak's business, service, and products.

In fact, it was feedback gleaned from consumers' online conversation that inspired Kodak to develop a new feature on a hugely popular line of small digital vid-

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eo cameras, known as the Zi6. Kodak's corporate listeners began noticing a trend, as users commented on what they liked and didn't like about the Zi6 line. A

few suggestions kept surfacing: a need for an external mic jack, a flexible USB port, and image stabilization. This info went to Kodak's commercialization team, which rapidly modified the next iteration of the product.

The Zi8 "flew off the shelves," Hoehn says. "That was a year ago, and they're now the benchmark in that [product category]. It was a wonderful thing, and it came from listening and having agile, talented people in the business group."

Dell is another company that has been leading the way when it comes to listening. Less than a year ago, the Round Rock, Texas-based computer giant became one of the first corporations to launch a digital command center, which sort of works like air traffic control for all things digital. The 5,000-person team tunes into more than 27,000 keywords in 11 different languages related to their technologies. Searching for keywords and phrases, such as "new computer technology" can clue them into emerging trends. This command center also communicates with its digital audience, helping solve their problems or educating them about the newest tech features.

Even the United States Army has been digitally monitoring its potential recruits, as well as engaging them in conversation. "Our target audience of age 17-to-24 is texting, listening to their iPods, watching TV, doing Facebook," says Bruce Jasurda, the Army's Chief Marketing Officer. "It became painfully apparent, a blinding flash of the obvious, that we needed to look at both how our prospects were consuming infor-

mation and where we were in our efforts to try to reach them and communicate with them.”

The Army created the community site Army Strong Stories, a place where soldiers, families, and prospective recruits can gather to talk. This community not only gives the Army a platform for dispelling old myths, it gives interested parties a direct line to and information from soldiers in the field.

“When we talk to young men and women thinking about joining the Army, we talk about Army values,” says Jasurda. “And it is a very short list of things you might expect—respect and trust. If we live those values, why wouldn’t we follow them in our marketing?”

With so many conversations going on at any given time (Twitter alone reports some one billion Tweets per week), filtering, or “intelligent listening,” is key. New businesses have sprung up in the last several years to help companies make sense of all that chatter. A Canadian firm named Radian6 compiles hundreds of millions of relevant posts via its customized software. They then help companies analyze and capitalize on those bits of digital feedback.

In other words, the technology is dazzling and invaluable, but the nuanced interpretation of all that chatter—the sharpened listening skills of people like you and me—remains the difference-maker. So slide over, all you CEOs and COOs. There are new powerbrokers on the scene, and you’ll know those CLO when you see them. They’re the ones with the big ears and an insight that you’ll be crowing—no, *tweeting* about.

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