Warc research indicates rise in non-trackable conversations about your brand

Warc research suggests a growing proportion of online social activity is 'dark', driven by the rise of chat or mobile-focused messenger apps, such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Line and WeChat. These online conversations, which are not trackable by marketers, will have a growing impact on brands' social strategy in 2017.

This is one of six trends featured in Warc's Toolkit 2017, in association with Deloitte Digital.

Jason Warnes

The research indicates that 84% of social sharing happens via dark social platforms whilst 90% of social marketing investment is on public platforms.

Jason Warnes, digital marketing partner at Deloitte Digital explains, "The emergence of chat functionality on smartphones has gone beyond the simple sharing of messages and pictures and has become a complete ecosystem for consumers. This has the potential to provide a wealth of data touchpoints for organisations to tap into, but many of these touchpoints are contained within private networks, creating a challenge for marketers."

David Tiltman, head of content at Warc, adds, "The rise of 'dark social' has two major implications for marketers. First, there may be an impact on social listening techniques and the quality of information available from monitoring 'open' social platforms. Second, there is expected to be a move away from 'real time' social strategies towards conversation-based approaches."

Key insights

1. Levels of 'dark social' vary by category: According to a RadiumOne research study, 84% of social sharing happens via 'dark social' platforms such as email, copy-and-paste links in instant messaging apps and texting. However, 90% of social marketing investment is on public platforms - making 'dark social' a potential area of opportunity for marketers. Dark social sharing by consumers varies wildly by category with the automotive category ranked the highest at 82.4%, followed by finance (72.1%), FMCG (61%) and retail (56.3%).
2. Brands may be missing out on 'dark social' insights: 'Dark social' may be a better reflection of a consumer's true feelings than comments posted on public platforms where a consumer may be presenting a particular persona or image. As such, it is becoming increasingly challenging for brands to build a holistic understanding around key buzz topics in the category they operate in, as well as picking up direct buzz around respective brands, products and campaigns.

3. Link shorteners are a low-tech way of testing 'dark social' activity: There are various steps brands can take to track sharing in 'dark social' channels. Shortened URLs can encourage people to share using trackable links. In addition, "cross-comparing" spikes in dark social with popular content themes might offer new insights regarding the subjects that attract the highest number of shares, as well as identifying the topics of particular interest to online audiences.

4. Chat apps are moving social marketing toward conversations: Chatbots are becoming more than CRM platforms; they are increasingly able to answer consumer questions at all stages of the customer journey. Designing for conversational experiences will require a completely new approach to branding combining complex data management, Artificial Intelligence and a brand's tone of voice.

5. Brands are already delivering successful chatbot initiatives: Numerous brands are already exploring whether chatbots can boost their business. Marketers experimenting with chatbots are advised to identify the precise

consumer needs, which chatbots can fulfil for a brand, and consider which platform(s) may be most appropriate in the short term (for testing) and the long term (for reaching a brand's target audience).

6. Marketers will need to decide on which platforms they deploy chatbots: The chatbot industry is growing at a rapid rate, with many ways for marketers to design and implement this type of CRM. Marketers however will need to consider their consumers and industry when designing their approach to chatbots. For example, it remains to be seen if consumers would trust a chatbot on Facebook with their bank details versus using a bot on their bank's website, or the website of an established retailer.

7. China's WeChat shows how chat might evolve: Tencent-owned WeChat is setting the bar for what messaging and social networking will look like in the future. It has developed from a chat app into a mobile lifestyle hub, providing, for example, an e-commerce platform, ticket booking for restaurants, and cab hailing. Crucially, it has payment services included, allowing it not just to connect people but also connect people to business. As a result, WeChat has become the platform to which other chat apps are looking for inspiration.

The rise of 'dark social' and chat apps is one of six key trends featured in Warc's Toolkit 2017. The annual report, produced in association with Deloitte Digital, brings together the best of Warc's content over the past year - the latest ideas, research and examples. The result is a guide to current thinking and the implications for marketers. For more information, go to www.warc.com.

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