



How social sensing sheds light on customer behavior in a pandemic

Tapping a direct line to consumers' opinions and values becomes more vital in a world upended by pandemic. Customer behaviors are shifting fast, and any business looking to thrive in these new circumstances needs to understand and respond to those trends—even when their evolution over weeks and months may be unpredictable. The social sensing tools that Heat + Deloitte Digital bring to bear provide a dynamic, real-time view of consumer sentiment.

Customer behaviors and priorities are shifting quickly as society responds to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it's shopping for groceries, taking an airplane flight, or getting an education, life activities are being rethought with the simple goal of staying safe. Businesses see the changes and understand their importance—at least in broad strokes. But the new environment also mandates a pressing need for better intelligence about what customers are thinking. To thrive in a world forever changed by this pandemic, businesses need finger-on-the pulse data on consumer sentiments and trends.

Social sensing addresses that need. A direct line to consumers' unvarnished opinions and deeply held values on social media is within grasp as effective new tools bring marketing organizations a trove of insights. Real-time intelligence from online conversations is serving an important role as businesses try to shift from reactive to proactive.

Heat + Deloitte Digital heard from marketers and brand managers, as the pandemic spread, that they were seeking dynamic information to help inform their decision making. In response, using our Heat AI platform and Sprinklr's state of the art social listening tools, we can help marketers cull meaningful insights in real time. While the main focus is on the impact of the pandemic on business, government, and society, these themes often intersect with others. When this occurs, we include it in our reports to provide a full and nuanced snapshot of what consumers are discussing.

The technologies make it possible to assemble a snapshot of volume, share of voice, sentiment, and geographical and demographic trends. The Heat AI platform allows us to predict how social conversations will grow over a three-day timeframe, which is useful in a period when developments that are months or even weeks in the future have become difficult to predict.

So, what is social sensing telling us about the pandemic? What can social listening tell us about how consumers are reacting to the pandemic, and how customers are changing because of it? Here are some of the insights our social listening efforts have yielded.



Social issues are at the fore

Societal issues have gained prominence on social media in ways never seen previously. Trending topics have ranged from small business loans to mortgage forbearance to the spread of disease in prisons, and conversations move quickly to the implications for society as a whole. For example, when new claims for unemployment benefits started shattering records, the topic was amplified on social media, and then it developed further to encompass issues related to unemployed workers losing their health insurance.

The implications for businesses seeking to better understand and respond to these developments? Their customers are thinking very seriously about civic affairs and social justice issues—in ways not typically seen on social media before. Businesses should adjust their messaging to acknowledge this, and they should embrace the complex challenge of connecting with consumers in a dramatically different landscape.

Circumstances shape values

When more than 44 million people have had their circumstances affected because of job loss, businesses will likely see a corresponding shift in their values. And values, in turn, shape customer behavior. Understanding these shifts is going to be critical for organizations as they determine what their messaging should include, and how best to engage their audience.

Empathy matters

For marketers to connect with their customers, they need to realize that people are receiving overwhelming and often conflicting information as they navigate this pandemic. In such circumstances, their decisions are likely more emotional than ever. How to respond? A business may be tempted to simply deliver facts faster and with more clarity. What may be more effective, though, is to deliver information and messages with greater empathy. People whose lives are disrupted, whose long-held views are being challenged, may be less likely to absorb facts until their emotions are acknowledged.

Some things stay the same

Consumers are hyperaware of what's changed in their lives—how much has changed. Businesses should be aware of this, and tailor their messaging to speak to a changed, and changing, audience. But businesses may also need to remind customers about what hasn't changed. A brand's purpose doesn't have to change, if it's clearly thought through and relevant in a world that's responding to and emerging from COVID-19. But it will be incumbent upon marketers to explain to the audience how the brand fits into the new reality.

Evolving conversations

- **Health care** An early hot topic was personal protective equipment, or the lack of it, then telehealth to access non-COVID-19 medical care. Social listening heard the conversation shift to protecting frontline health care workers, who were becoming fearful about going to work. Interest rose in the potential inherent in antibody testing. Later still, online discussion found a focus on longer-term mental health concerns.
- **Retail** Shortages have been a through line in COVID-19 conversations on social media. First it was toilet paper and hand sanitizer, then that gave way to discussion of shortages of grocery store workers and delivery people. When the topic shifted to meat shortages, the related interest of plant-based meat alternatives quickly followed.
- **Human capital** Work-from-home was a starting point, with adaptation discussed and then the struggles of organizations that didn't have adequate technical infrastructure to make the change. Social sensing showed interest shifting next to cyber security, collaboration, productivity. Then another topic: Will the traditional office workplace ever fully return?

Brands can take cues from evolving social media conversations, but first they have to be sure that they are entering the conversations that really matter and that they understand them fully. They need to be able to do this in real time, before the conversation moves on. Powerful social sensing tools can help businesses do this with unprecedented effectiveness and accuracy.

Of course, machines can only churn out the data and the information. Then, it's up to smart people working together with this bounty of intelligence to analyze the information and ultimately deliver the insights and narrative that provide value to the marketing organization.

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