Learning by Listening

Listening to conversations is how you find the low-hanging fruit in social marketing. The basics are easy to do, the results are immediate, the risk is low, and the learning is often compelling. There is a lot more to effective listening than just signing up for Google Alerts, however. In this chapter we describe some of the powerful tactics you can use to tune in to conversations at a deep level.

Business-to-business (B2B) marketers have it easier than their business-to-consumer (B2C) colleagues in the area of listening. In most cases, the customer base is smaller, there's less competition for top search rankings, and there are fewer conversations to monitor. There's also less anonymity in B2B social networks, which means conversations are more relevant, more meaningful, and of higher quality. You are more likely to trust information from sources you can identify. "Your professional identity and your public identity are the same thing," says LinkedIn director of global enterprise operations Brian Frank, "so you know who you're talking to."

Listening to the Crowd

Online conversation monitoring can be labor-intensive, and it has been frustratingly resistant to automation. There are dozens of paid services that listen to blogs, discussion boards, and Twitter streams to

derive patterns or sentiment. Among them are Nielsen BuzzMetrics, Radian6, RelevantNoise, SAS, Scout Labs and Visible Technologies. These services range in price from a few hundred dollars per month to more than $10,000 per month, and all have one thing in common: they're imperfect.

Human speech patterns are devilishly hard for machines to understand, particularly when dialect, slang, and sarcasm are involved. A baby boomer who calls a TV ad "sick" is probably repulsed by it. A millennial who says the same thing is paying a compliment.

"We are a decade away from reliable, computer-based sentiment analysis," says Converseon chief executive officer (CEO) Rob Key, whose proprietary conversation mining platform uses seven different filters, one of them human, to monitor social media. "If you hear claims from analytics companies that their listening platforms are achieving 90% accuracy based entirely on machine approaches, be very careful. Where we're going to be three to five years from will be extraordinary. But we're not there yet."

There are many ways to find opportunity in conversations. "If you notice that a large number of people are unhappy with your competition's product or services, you may want to consider tapping into that concern when talking about the benefits of your product," writes Rick Sloboda, a blogger and senior copywriter at Webcopyplus in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Niche B2B companies can usually afford to monitor all the conversations in their segment, but for high-volume markets like office supplies or computers, there are probably too many discussions to track individually. In those cases, the best approach is to listen for trends.

The Deepwater Horizon Unified Command was "reading literally hundreds of posts and comments daily on our Facebook page," during the 2010 BP oil spill, says Navy Lieutenant Commander Jim Hoeft. "We didn't have the resources to respond to everyone. But when we saw a question trending, we allocated staff to respond."

One of the difficulties of monitoring conversations is that they're so dispersed. Google does a fairly good job of searching the static web, but as more discussions happen in near-real time on platforms

like Twitter and Facebook, other tools are needed. A good listening platform is more analogous to a dashboard than to a stethoscope.

Listening to Keywords

Listening to customers online involves monitoring a portfolio of searches and analyzing the results. Understanding keywords is a necessary first step, as we discussed in Chapter 2. Monitoring tools can be used to track and follow multiple searches simultaneously over a wide range of platforms.

Keyword searches don't deal well with imprecision. Results are only as accurate as the keywords sued. Queries that surface off-topic results need to be revised and re-run until they find what's needed. The key to effective social media monitoring is to construct accurate complex queries at the outset. In Chapter 7, we explain the concept of constructing complex keyword queries. But for now, let's start by examining how to use those queries to set up a free social media monitoring dashboard in Google Reader.

Building a Social Media Monitoring Dashboard

Google Reader is an RSS reader, which is kind of like TiVo for the web. RSS (real simple syndication) is a protocol that enables a user to receive information without actively requesting it. Once you subscribe to an RSS feed, new content from that source appears automatically in your reader, usually within minutes. The publisher of that feed has a persistent connection to you until you unsubscribe. The value of an RSS reader is that instead having to search for relevant information, you save your complex queries in the reader and let the relevant information come to you.

Go to www.google.com/reader and use your Gmail address (create an account if you don't have one) and password to sign up for a Google Reader account. The first time you sign in to Google Reader, your account will look like the screen in Figure 6.1.

Paste the URL of the RSS
feed you'd like to
subscribe into this box.
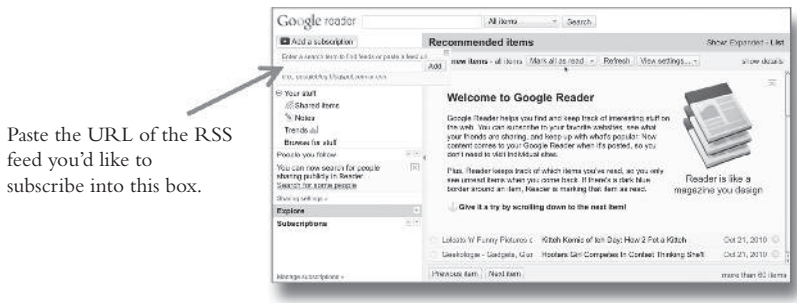
Figure 6.1   Monitoring Social Media with Google Reader.

The "Add a subscription button" is where you can add RSS feeds. Some people use this box to search for RSS feeds, but we're going to show you how to build custom feeds based on complex queries to monitor news, blogs, Twitter, Wikipedia, and Craigslist. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing there is no easy way to pull in a custom RSS feed to monitor discussions in Facebook or LinkedIn. Even on the paid social media monitoring platforms, Facebook is a major blind spot because of its registration requirement and because the social network wants to keep you where they can serve advertising.

But there's still a lot that can be monitored with Google Reader. For example, companies used to hire clipping services to monitor the news for relevant articles. But with Google Reader, you can do that yourself for free.

Go to www.news.google.com (see Figure 6.2) and enter a complex query into the search box. Click the "search" button and review the resulting links. If the results are relevant, scroll to the bottom of the page and click the RSS link. Most web sites that offer RSS feeds identify them with an orange badge like the one in Figure 6.2. To convert your Google News search results to RSS, click the orange badge or the RSS link.

If you are using a current web browser, the formatting of the page will change as it does in Figure 6.3. The Google News search has been converted to RSS. Select and copy the URL of that web page. In many cases, the process of loading a feed into Google Reader involves clicking just one button.
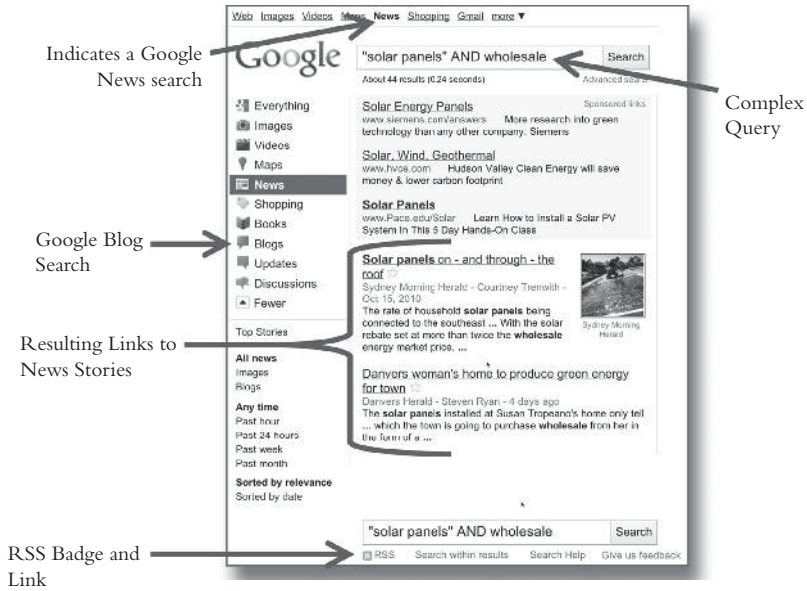
Indicates a Google
News search

Complex
Query

Google Blog
Search

Resulting Links to
News Stories

RSS Badge and
Link

Figure 6.2   Converting a Google News Search.

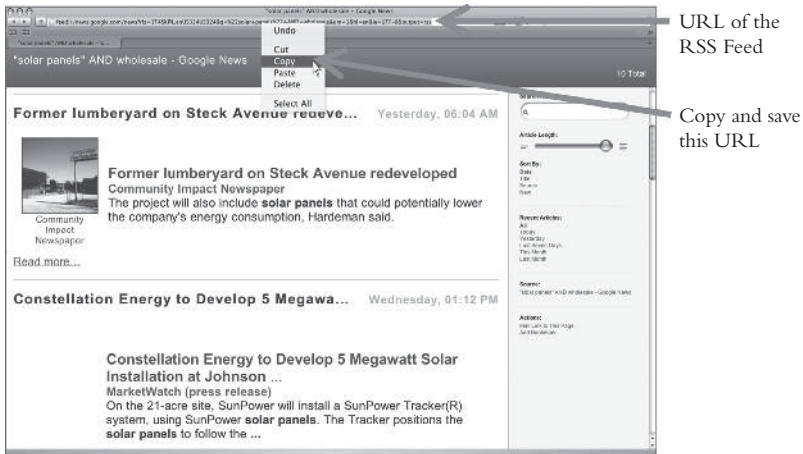URL of the
RSS Feed

Copy and save
this URL

Figure 6.3   Subscribing to Google News as RSS.

Paste the URL into the "Add a subscription" box in Reader as shown in Figure 6.1 and click "Add." All new stories that appear in Google News from this point forward will show up in your Google Reader, as shown in Figure 6.4.

You can subscribe to a Google Blog search (Figure 6.2) the same way. In fact, anywhere you see an RSS option, you can subscribe to content on that page. Mozilla's Firefox browser (version 3 or higher) makes this easy by displaying an orange RSS icon in the address bar when an RSS–enabled site is in the browser window. Keep adding relevant sources to build your basic dashboard.

You may also want to monitor activity around your industry on Wikipedia, which is one of the most visited web sites on the Internet and is an excellent way to gauge popular sentiment. There's usually a lively debate taking place on Wikipedia's back discussion channel concerning the contents of each article.

Subjects of a Wikipedia entry are discouraged from editing the content because of conflict of interest. Nevertheless, you are allowed to flag false information and suggest it be changed, as long as you can attribute the information to a neutral, third–party source. Your corporate web site is not considered a neutral source, but a news article or an academic research report usually is.
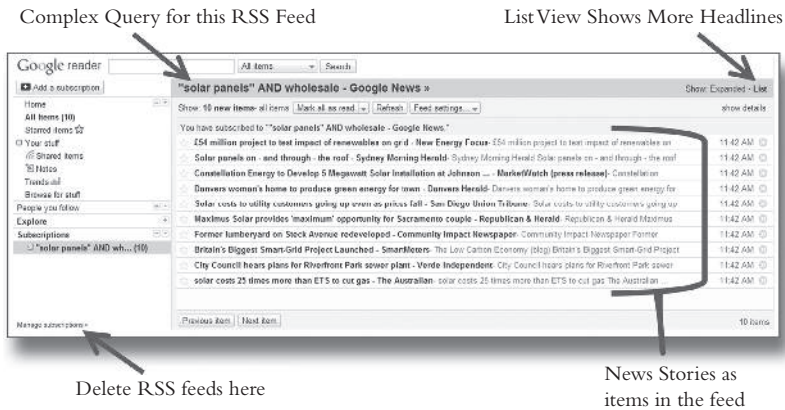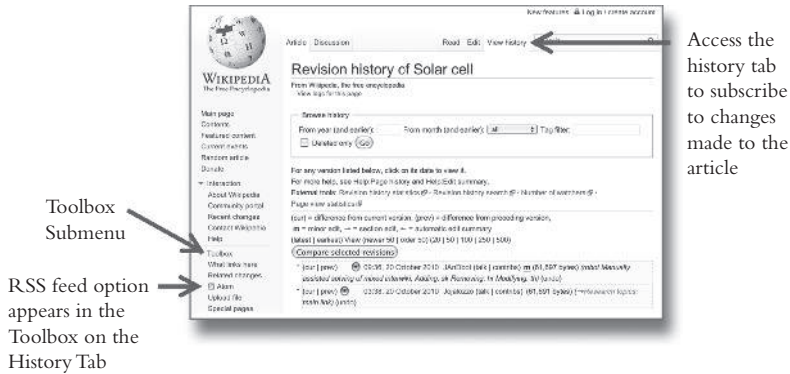

Complex Query for this RSS Feed

List View Shows More Headlines

Delete RSS feeds here

News Stories as items in the feed

Figure 6.4   Subscribing to RSS Feeds in Google Reader.

Access the history tab to subscribe to changes made to the article

Toolbox Submenu

RSS feed option appears in the Toolbox on the History Tab

Figure 6.5   Subscribing to the Edits of a Wikipedia Article.

To subscribe to edits being made to an article in Wikipedia (Figure 6.5), select the "View history" tab, open the "Toolbox" submenu and click the orange RSS badge or the "Atom" link next to it to convert the revision history to RSS, copy the URL and add it as a subscription to Google Reader (Figure 6.1). An Atom feed is just another RSS format. It works fine in Google Reader.

If your business has aftermarket sales, like solar panels, forklifts, vending machines, or restaurant equipment, it may be useful to stay on top of what those items are fetching on the market so that you can keep your pricing competitive. Craigslist (Figure 6.6), which is one of the 20 most visited web sites according to Compete.com, offers an RSS option for subscribing to its classifieds listings. Again, click on the RSS badge, copy and paste the URL of the RSS page into the "Add a subscription" box in Google Reader.

You can use RSS to monitor Twitter as well, whether or not you have a Twitter account. Go to search.twitter.com (see Figure 6.7), enter a query, click the "Feed for this query" link next to the orange RSS badge, and copy the URL of the resulting web page. Use "Add a subscription" on Google Reader and all Tweets that match your query will be stored for you.

Another great feature of Twitter Search can be found under the "Advanced Search" link to the right of the "Search" button. Limiting keyword searches by geography can be a great way for regionally
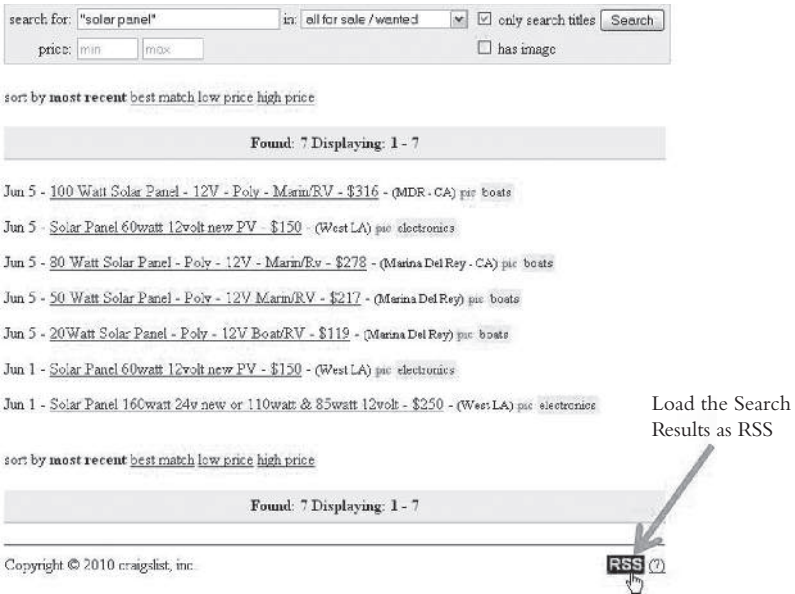
Figure 6.6   Subscribing to a Craigslist Query.

Figure 6.7   Subscribing to Twitter via RSS.

focused businesses to listen to customers in their area. For example, a Twitter Search (see Figure 6.8) for "solar panels" within a 100–mile radius of Chicago could be a good query for a Midwestern distributor of solar panels.
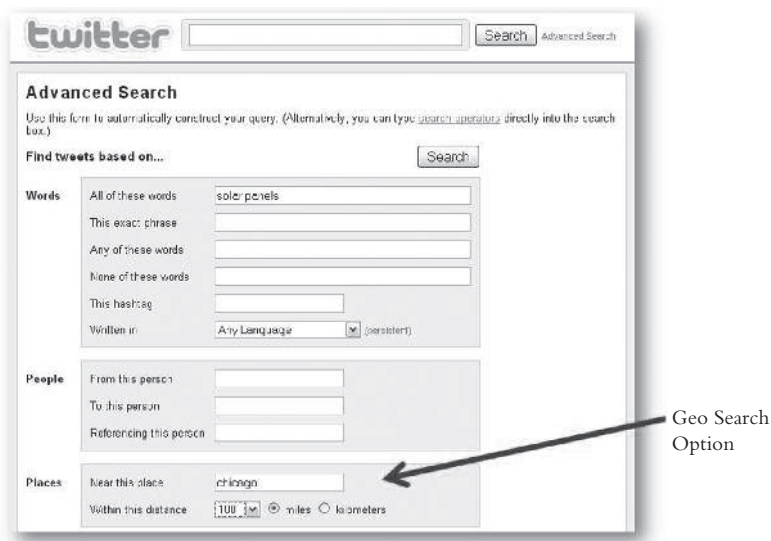
Figure 6.8   Twitter Keyword Search.

Figure 6.9   Subscribing to RSS Feeds in Google Reader.

There is no limit to the number of RSS feeds you can monitor in Google Reader. Figure 6.9 shows an account monitoring five feeds, each from a different source. We're monitoring information about solar panels in Craigslist, Google News, Twitter, Wikipedia,

and Google Blog search. In this example, we've renamed the RSS Subscription using the "Manage subscriptions" link at the bottom of the left-hand column. You can also group subscriptions into folders.

Here are some other services you can bookmark and check on a regular basis:

Samepoint.biz.com

This is a social media search engine. It crawls blogs, Twitter, social networks, Q&A sites, review sites, podcasts, and document and photo-sharing sites, among others. Although not as comprehensive as Google, it saves you from having to set up searches on more domain-specific listening posts. Save queries as RSS feeds and the quality improves over time.

XinuReturns.com, Compete.com, and Alexa.com

All three of these services track a web site's performance in terms of inbound links, the number of pages indexed by search engines, bookmarks, and other factors. They're useful for telling how well your blog is performing, for example. Use them in tandem, because performance in inconsistent. WebsiteGrader.com scores your search visibility and recommends improvements.

WatchThatPage.com

This is a novel service that alerts subscribers by e-mail of any changes to a designated web page. It's particularly useful for keeping an eye on your competition.

BoardTracker.com

This search engine specializes in message boards and discussion groups, which were the earliest forms of social media and which are still the most active in some industries. Google also searches message board

posts, but BoardTracker and competitor Omgili.com provide more focused results.

TweetDeck.com

Originally conceived as a reader for Twitter messages, this desktop application is now a functional tool for monitoring Facebook and LinkedIn traffic as well as saved Twitter searches. It's easy to create new columns that suck in all new mentions of keywords you specify or just track trending topics.

HootSuite.com

This is a social media client, like TweetDeck, but it runs in a web browser. Its advantages are the ability to schedule both tweets and status updates and the power to communicate from multiple Twitter and Facebook accounts from one page. HootSuite and CoTweet also have management features oriented toward corporate users.

CoTweet.com

Twitter suite that allows a team to collaborate on the management of a branded, corporate Twitter account. CoTweet is a direct competitor to HootSuite.

Trackur.com

This buzz monitoring tool claims to mine more than 100 million sources for keyword mentions and assign sentiment analysis to the results. The search is impressive, although the sentiment analysis isn't. Still, the basic free account is a pretty good deal.

You can measure page views or web traffic to a blog, or any web site for that matter, at Compete.com or Quantcast.com. These sites will also allow you to compare the traffic on different sites to each other.

Figure 6.10   Compete Screenshot.

In Figure 6.10, we copied the URLs of three different blogs about solar energy that we discovered through Google Reader and pasted them into the fields at Compete.com. The blogs at solarpanelspower .net and globalsolartechnology.com both draw significantly more traffic than the one at greenlivingexplained.com.

You might ask why we don't just recommend using Google Alerts for this process? Google Alerts is a popular service that sends you e-mail or updates your RSS feed whenever the keywords you enter match new entries in the Google search index. Nearly every marketer now uses Google Alerts, but Google Reader's dashboard-like interface provides a number of advantages over e-mail delivery.

For one thing, Google Alerts results are limted to the body of an e-mail and can't easily be searched unless you save every e-mail. In contrast, Google Reader lets you maintain an archive of links indefi-nitely. You can search the links you've collected over time without hunting through e-mail messages. Push technology like e-mail is also distracting. In contrast, a dashboard lets you check activity when it's convenient for you.

Google Alerts is great for information you need to know imme-diately. We recommend you use it to monitor keywords that might indicate a problem with your products, the name of an unannounced

product or a dissatisfied customer. On a day-to-day basis, though, dashboards are more flexible.

Measure Marketing Effectiveness

Most web hosts offer some sort of web site statistics. If your web host doesn't offer any measurement options, or if your site is hosted internally on a company server, Google Analytics can provide insight on whether your web site traffic justifies the investment in your online marketing efforts. Once you have a way to measure how people get to and consume the content of your web site, you can use that information to see if your efforts are delivering worthwhile results. We can't anticipate all the ways to evaluate your web stats, but we can suggest some baseline evaluation metrics.

Keyword Validation

Review the keywords people search to find your web site. For most sites, search is the largest source of traffic. The other two traffic sources are referring sites, which are links posted by other site owners, and direct visits from visitors typing your URL into a browser or clicking a link in an e-mail. When you analyze the keywords people search to get to your site, you're testing your own assumptions about how people describe you. If the words they're using aren't the ones you'd expect, you'd better revisit your search optimization strategy.

Eric uses the web stats provided by his web host and Google Analytics (see Figure 6.11) to measure the effectiveness of his online marketing efforts. Google Analytics, which can be easily installed by publishing a unique tracking code on your web site, selecting "Traffic Sources" and then "Keywords," reveals a list of search terms people are using to find him. If the top 10 searches include keywords that match up with the products or services he sells, he knows his web site is doing its job because people with a need for his services are finding it through search.

You can drill down deeper into the effectiveness of your keywords by looking at the "Bounce Rate" (see Figure 6.11), which is

Figure 6.11   Keyword Effectiveness in Google Analytics.

the percentage of visitors that viewed only one page on your web site. If a keyword has a high bounce rate, that means most visitors browsed no deeper than the first page they saw. A high bounce rate may not necessarily be negative, though.

Blog visits often originate from search engines, and visitors usually only read the post that brings them to the site. If you see a high bounce rate, look at the "Avg. Time on Site" to see how long people stayed on the single page they visited. If the blog drives traffic to a landing page designed to convert site visits into measurable transactions, like e-commerce sales or leads, then the bounce rate and average time on site mean very little. That's because your landing page is generating results.

But if the page is intended to begin an engagement or education process, then a high bounce rate could be a sign that visitors aren't finding what they came there for. This means there's a mismatch between the keywords that are bringing you search traffic and the expectations of the people searching that keyword.

If your site ranks high for a complex keyword query like "patent attorney" AND Michigan, but the bounce rate is 90 percent or more and the average time on the site is 10 seconds or less, it's safe to assume your web site is not providing searchers with the information they

seek. You need to reassess the effectiveness of the aesthetic design, layout, and content on your web site because people who are actively looking for your services aren't responding favorably to what they're finding.

To lower your bounce rate and increase the time visitors spend on your site, create entry pages optimized for specific search terms, and make sure the Web copy on those pages delivers on the expectations of the searcher. People will stay longer and dig deep if their search for a patent attorney in Michigan leads them to an entry page with the specific information they seek, rather than a long, bulleted web page listing all the legal specialties your firm offers throughout the north-central United States.

Top Content

The next measurement to pay attention to when reviewing web statistics is *most visited Web pages*. Eric wants people to visit his training calendar of upcoming workshops and his Social Media Boot Camp sign-up page. Figure 6.12 shows the most visited pages at ericschwartzman .com, using a free web analysis package called AWStats. The arrows indicate which of the most visited pages on Eric's site are designed to drive business. The two highest-ranking pages are his home page and his site's RSS feed. And although he'd certainly like more traffic overall, he knows that since the pages on his site that are designed to convert visits to transactions are ranking third and fourth in overall traffic, his visitors are viewing the pages he wants them to see.

Pages-URL (Top 10) - Full list - Entry - Exit			
190 different pages-url	Viewed	Average size	Entry
/pr/schwartzman/default.aspx	540	18.55 KB	307
/pr/schwartzman/news.xml	230	26.78 KB	133
/pr/schwartzman/training.aspx	190	22.50 KB	76
/pr/schwartzman/social-media-pr-boot-camp.aspx	158	24.53 KB	69
/pr/schwartzman/about-overview.aspx	134	24.49 KB	9
/pr/schwartzman/training-course-presentations.aspx	122	15.81 KB	11
/pr/schwartzman/strategy.aspx	117	17.50 KB	30
/pr/schwartzman/conferences.aspx	117	29.73 KB	11
/pr/schwartzman/social-media-policy-template.aspx	116	15.51 KB	27
/pr/schwartzman/newmediaoutreach.aspx	116	20.27 KB	4

Training Calendar Page → /pr/schwartzman/training.aspx
Social Media Boot Camp Registration Page → /pr/schwartzman/social-media-pr-boot-camp.aspx

Figure 6.12   Most Visited Web Pages in AWStats.

Referring Sites

The last set of metrics we'll cover are referring sites. These are sites that transit a visitor to you via an inbound link. Yahoo! Site Explorer shows you all your inbound links, but the referring-site analytics show the visits that result from those links. Inbound links are valuable to your search rank because the more inbound links you have, the higher you tend to rank in Google. But inbound links that people actually click on are more valuable if they result in direct traffic.

Figure 6.13 is a screenshot from Google Analytics showing which referring sites are sending traffic to ericschwartzman.com. The graph indicates that of all the social marketing efforts Eric conducts, his podcast delivers the most qualified visits, because visitors coming from his podcast site spend more time and visit more pages than those originating from Twitter, even though Twitter refers more traffic. LinkedIn is the next most effective source of referrals, and Facebook comes in fourth.

Analyzing your keywords, most visited pages, and referring sites by bounce rate and average time spent brings your listening efforts full circle because it tells you whether or not your social media marketing efforts are working. The more you listen, the more you learn. But while you may be listening for marketing opportunities, you may wind up hearing things that could help your company in other ways as well.
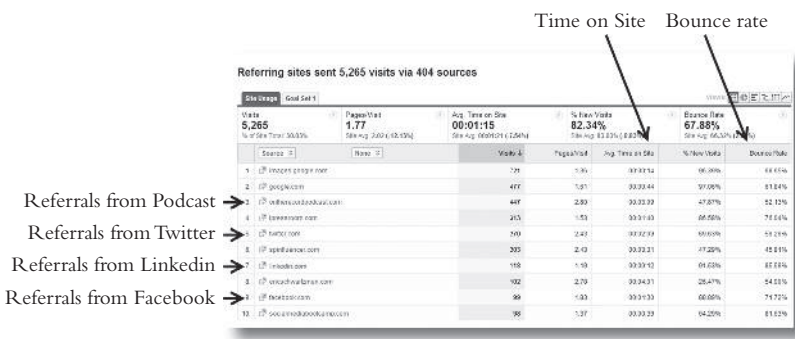
Figure 6.13   Referring Sites in Google Analytics.

Internal Feedback Loops

In this chapter, we've mainly talked about listening as a means to enhance your marketing programs, but the information you discover could help you in the areas of client services, product development, human resources, community relations, and elsewhere. You need a way to convey that intelligence. Corporate departments are often independent fiefdoms competing against one another for resources. It hasn't traditionally been marketing's job to share feedback with other departments, but that process needs to be put in place to truly benefit from the value of listening. Don't pass on information just because it isn't relevant to your marketing efforts. Make it a point to share comments that can help your developers, product managers, executives, and others who need to listen to their markets. This can be sensitive at first because people don't always welcome feedback, but once they hear feedback from the market, it can be a powerful motivator. It just may be the wake-up call that some of your skeptical executives need.

"You need to think big," says Converson's Key. "You need to infuse the value of social media across the enterprise for sustainable differentiation." If everyone is listening and responding when necessary, it makes your company faster and more responsive. That's the kind of competitive advantage you can't buy at any price.

☞ **RESPONDING TO WHAT YOU HEAR**

One of the first things that will become apparent when you begin using a social media dashboard is that there are bloggers out there talking about you and/or your market. This is particularly true in the B2B sphere, where bloggers gravitate to the long-form format that enables them to discuss complex technical issues.

Blogging has evolved into the favored social media format for professional audiences. Although the medium's popularity among teens and young adults has declined by nearly half over the past three years, the population of over-30 bloggers has actually grown by more than 50 percent, according to a 2010 Pew Research Center report.[1] For many B2B publications, guest

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bloggers are now the largest source of original content. ScienceBlogs.com is an invitation-only aggregator that brings together some of the most provocative scientific bloggers. Directories like Alltop.com and BlogCatalog .com syndicate blog feeds in hundreds of categories. And then there are the millions of independent bloggers who just talk because they care.

As trade media continues its precipitous decline and the importance of domain experts grows, marketers are increasingly courting these influencers. Software giant SAP has one of the best social marketing programs we've seen. It engages with influential bloggers regularly and maintains an open-door policy, with the goal of providing immediate response to any questions they ask. The company keeps profiles of key bloggers and matches them with appropriate executives in frequent briefings and meetings. It also gives them special treatment and special programming at the company's two big annual customer conferences. "We're engaging in conversations we never would have had before," said global communications vice president Mike Prosceno in an interview with ZDNet blogger Michael Krigsman.[2] "If people are going to cover SAP, why not let them hear from us what we're doing and why we're doing it?"

Chipmaker Intel is another company that has bought into the influence of B2B blogs. In 2008, it hand-picked 15 popular bloggers to get a year of behind-the-scenes perspective on activity inside the company in exchange for educating Intel communicators on how to connect through online channels. The bloggers got exposure, and Intel enjoyed bonus publicity through new channels like the enormously popular Rocketboom video blog.

Many communications professionals have a love-hate relationship with the whole idea of blogger relations programs. On one hand, they acknowledge that these new channels are important, but they are also overwhelmed by the sheer volume of relationships they need to maintain. We don't believe blogger relations programs are essential for every company, but we do recommend that you know the major influencers on your market. If volume is a problem, triage and focus on the most important sources.

Be careful about assuming that any service that claims to track blogs is completely reliable. There is no standard definition of a blog, so all kinds of content can get mixed in with search results.

The trick is to separate the wheat from chaff. In reality, few bloggers have much influence. One of the easiest ways to see whether a blogger deserves your attention is to check his or her activity level. Bloggers who post new entries once a month or less probably don't have a very large following.

Use some of the tactics mentioned earlier in this chapter to assess influence based on metrics such as inbound links, comments, and traffic

estimates. You can also just search on the person's name to see if it shows up in mainstream media. Bloggers are becoming a favorite source of expertise for reporters.

You also need to verify that the blogger's topic is relevant to your business. While working on a project for a B2B client in the pharmaceutical industry, Paul was surprised to find that some of the most popular blogs by chemical engineering PhDs focused on topics like politics and cooking. On the surface, these people looked like important market influencers, but a little research established that their blogging interests lay elsewhere. Also consider the total of a blogger's online activity. The most prolific scribes are often also active in Facebook, Twitter, and special interest networks.

Finally, look at attitude. A blogger who is persistently sarcastic or negative may be trouble-in-waiting. Avoid people with an agenda.

When commenting on blogs, it's okay to include a link back to your web site but don't post links indiscriminately. Comment spam is a real problem for bloggers, and unless the host sees you adding value, you could actually make an enemy. Take the time to read the blog post and make an effort to contribute something useful.

Review previous blog posts and comments to see if the blogger is worth engaging in the first place. Someone who is unwilling to accept alternative points of view is probably more trouble than he or she is worth.

These are the axe grinders. Unless you want to become a missionary, you're not going to convert them easily into believers. Post respectful disagreements, but don't expect to have the last word. Sometimes the best you can do is register your opinion.

On the other hand, if you review the blogger's previous posts and comments and find the person to be tolerant, this is a better candidate for engagement. In his book *Twitterville,* Shel Israel offers guidelines from Richard Binhammer, a senior manager at Dell who leads the company's blogger relations effort. "Don't waste your time trying to convert atheists," Binhammer says. "Work on the agnostics in the room—doubters who might be turned into believers through conversation."

When executed with discipline, blogger relations programs can pay handsome results. For example, when ElectraTherm was preparing for the launch of the ElectraTherm Green Machine in 2008, it decided early that influential blogs would be part of its strategy. The company had only minimal awareness in mainstream media, and the launch of the Green Machine—a device that makes low-cost electricity from residual industrial waste—was a watershed event.

ElectraTherm had set up a working Green Machine at Southern Methodist University in Dallas to show off the technology. It was betting

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that knowledgeable energy bloggers would validate the technology and create buzz.

The goal was to achieve 15 online media hits with a total audience of at least 1 million. The program used podcasts and webcasts to reach its media targets based on evidence that multimedia tools get much higher attention from journalists.

The company's public relations agency, PilmerPR, assembled a list of influential energy bloggers and studied their work. They contacted the writers individually to offer content for them to post, resulting in coverage in more than 20 blogs. "With each blogger with which we developed a relationship, we saw many other blogs linking to that post. Once the news was carried by a few of the major blogs, we had crossed the hurdle and saw a lot of resulting blog coverage," the company wrote in a submission to the Society for New Communications Research's Excellence in New Communications awards.

As word-of-mouth awareness spread, other media outlets took notice. The announcement was featured in the hugely popular Engadget and Gizmodo technology blogs as well as on the popular TreeHugger. All told, the launch reached an estimated 37 million people, far exceeding the company's objectives.