

Evaluation and decision making in social media marketing

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SMM

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Received 7 October 2015
Revised 13 April 2016
20 August 2016
Accepted 25 October 2016

Abstract

Purpose – As organisations are increasing their investment in social media marketing (SMM), evaluation of such techniques is becoming increasingly important. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to knowledge regarding SMM strategy by developing a stage model of SMM evaluation and uncovering the challenges in this process.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews were conducted with 18 key informants working for specialist SMM agencies. Such informants are a particularly rich source, since they manage social media campaigns for a wide range of clients. An exploratory research was conducted and thematic analysis surfaced the key components of the SMM evaluation process and associated challenges.

Findings – The SMM evaluation framework is developed. This framework has the following six stages: setting evaluation objectives, identifying key performance indicators (KPIs), identifying metrics, data collection and analysis, report generation and management decision making. Challenges associated with each stage of the framework are identified, and discussed with a view to better understanding decision making associated with social media strategies. Two key challenges are the agency-client relationship and the available social analytics tools.

Originality/value – Despite an increasing body of research on social media objectives, KPIs and metrics, no previous study has explored how these components are embedded in a marketing campaign planning process. The paper also offers insights in the factors that make SMM evaluation complex and challenging. Recommendations for further research and practice are offered.

Keywords Social media marketing, Digital marketing, Social media analytics, Agency-client relationship, Social media marketing evaluation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Due to its dynamic and emergent nature, the effectiveness of social media as a marketing communications channel has presented many challenges for marketers. It is considered to be different to traditional marketing channels, and even other digital marketing channels, centring around a two-way conversation or exchange (Bacile *et al.*, 2014; Shih, 2009). Many organisations are investing in their social media presence because they appreciate the need to engage in existing social media conversations in order to protect their corporate or brand reputation (Lee and Youn, 2009), increase customer engagement (Gummerus *et al.*, 2012) or increase online sales (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). As organisations increasingly develop their social media presence, it is vital to be able to evaluate the impact of this investment, including its contribution to achieving marketing objectives, as well as more generally understanding any return-on-investment (ROI) (Pang and Lee, 2008; Fisher, 2009; Kumar and Mirchandani, 2012; McCann and Barlow, 2015).

Research into social media strategy is limited. There is some research in this area on some specific aspects of strategy, such as reputation management (Rokka *et al.*, 2014), the drivers, activities and benefits associated with social media (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014), practitioner case studies using one organisation such as Finnair (Jarvenpaa and Tuunainen, 2013), B2B companies adoption of social media (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011) and the



integration of social media into strategic marketing (Choi and Thoeni, 2016). Choi and Theoni (2016) in particular identify a number of challenges in the area of social media marketing (SMM) and suggest that further research is necessary.

There is a growing interest in the evaluation of the impact of SMM including research driven by the need to demonstrate the ROI from SMM (Fisher, 2009; Hoffman and Fodor, 2010; Kumar and Mirchandani, 2012; McCann and Barlow, 2015). There is also interest in the potential of SMM to enhance firm and brand equity (Luo *et al.*, 2013; Tirunillai and Tellis, 2012). However, there is a considerable journey to travel before the impact of SMM can be intelligently assessed. Some offer insights into the wider aspects of the processes associated with evaluation of SMM in specific contexts (Kim and Ko, 2012; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011; Murdough, 2010; Töllinen *et al.*, 2010), in addition, there has been significant activity on measurement frameworks and dashboards (Cvijikj *et al.*, 2012; Marklein and Paine, 2013; Peters *et al.*, 2013), and some discussion of the need to establish clearly defined goals, objectives and metrics related to the use of social media (e.g. Hoffman and Fodor, 2010; Murdough, 2010).

Only Jeffrey (2013) and McCann and Barlow (2015) have proposed frameworks that link measurement with SMM decision making and campaign planning. Thus far, neither framework has been empirically tested, and hence is prescriptive in nature rather than practice-based. Yet, as O'Sullivan *et al.* (2009) demonstrate, marketing performance measurement ability or frequency is linked to firm performance. Accordingly, SMM evaluation offers a pivotal context in which to consider the challenges associated with SMM decision making and management.

The aim of this research is contribute to knowledge and theory regarding social media strategy through an exploratory study of the evaluation of SMM, with a view to proposing a process framework. In addition, this paper presents a distillation of the challenges associated with the evaluation process. Hence, the objectives of this research are to:

- identify and define the stages of SMM evaluation, as operationalized by practitioners, and to propose a conceptual framework; and
- identify and summarise the challenges associated with SMM evaluation.

Next, previous research on the importance and potential of SMM and its evaluation is summarised. Then, the interview-based research methodology is outlined. This is followed by a report on SMM evaluation processes and a discussion of the associated challenges. Finally, the conclusion summarises the research and suggests recommendations for research and practice.

Literature review

SMM

Aral *et al.* (2013) argue that social media is “fundamentally changing the way we communicate, collaborate, consume, and create” (p. 3). Defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), social media are impacting on a wide range of business processes, from marketing and operations to finance (Luo *et al.*, 2013) and human resource management (Bolton, 2013). In the marketing context, social media is seen as essentially different to other forms of digital media (Hoffman and Novak, 2012; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010) and as potentially heralding a paradigm shift in marketing (Hanna *et al.*, 2011).

Indeed, studies demonstrate that participation in a firm's social media activities positively affects profitability. For example, Goh *et al.* (2013) studied the relative impact of social media on firm profits and established that user-generated content had a greater impact on profits than firm-created content. Tirunillai and Tellis (2012) demonstrate that online reviews and “chatter” are indicators of stock market performance, whilst Luo *et al.* (2013)

show that social media-based metrics are leading indicators of firm equity value. Given the significance of social media as an essential part of everyday business activities, it is important to consider the attributes of these strategic marketing activities in the modern digital economy.

Honing SMM requires evaluation, but it is evident that development of effective approaches to evaluation is not straightforward. Online conversations produce large volumes of semantic data that present considerable challenges to any analysis of social media activity (Larson and Watson, 2011). As such, an on-going debate exists surrounding the extent to which social media metrics can be aligned with established digital and general marketing metrics (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Weber, 2009).

Social media evaluation and decision making

The main body of work relevant to SMM evaluation relates to key performance indicators (KPIs) and metrics. For example, the Social Media Measurement Standards Coalition (Marklein and Paine, 2013) has generated a set of measurement standards as a means of developing SMM evaluation metrics. These includes content sourcing and transparency; reach and impressions; engagement and conversation; opinion and advocacy; influence; and, impact and value. Cvijikj *et al.* (2012) have linked metrics and KPIs in a tiered evaluation framework organised according to the following components: user analysis, user-generated content, engagement analysis and benchmarking. Peters *et al.* (2013) also studied the links between metrics and KPIs, whilst Pauwels *et al.* (2009) debated the contribution of dashboards. Heijnen *et al.*'s (2013) empirical analysis highlights the challenges in measuring KPIs with quantitative social media data sets, and suggest that such analysis needs to be supplemented by insights from practitioners' everyday experience. These works have fuelled the debate around the difficulties associated with SMM evaluation and in particular highlighted the absence of a holistic, or universally agreed approach.

In general, empirical research on SMM evaluation is limited; at best, evaluation is considered a minor aspect of a wider study within social media contexts. For example, Michaelidou *et al.* (2011) found that most B2B organisations do not adopt any metrics to assess SMM effectiveness. McCann and Barlow (2015) claim that 65 per cent of the SMEs in their sample did not measure the ROI in relation to social media activities. Some studies mention evaluation but do not elaborate on it to any great extent (e.g. Choi and Thoeni, 2016; Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Töllinen *et al.*, 2012). Kim and Ko (2012) explore the link between SMM and brand reputation in a fashion retail environment and suggest evaluation merits further exploration. In general, then, as suggested by Ruhi (2014), there is a need for empirical investigations that explore the link between SMM analytics and the generation of business intelligence.

Prior works contribute towards supporting the practices of SMM evaluation by proposing frameworks that link goals, objectives, KPIs and SMM metrics. For example, Jeffrey (2013) proposes a measurement process framework that embraces consideration of goals, stakeholders, objectives, social media KPIs, tools and benchmarks and analysis. McCann and Barlow (2015) propose a three-stage measurement framework of the ROI of social media, which includes planning, implementation and evaluation. However, both Jeffrey (2013) and McCann and Barlow's (2015) frameworks are prescriptive in nature rather than reflective of practice and their frameworks have yet to be empirically tested. Furthermore, both proposed frameworks lack a formal definition of the actions at each stage.

Methodology

Interview process

Since SMM, and more specifically its evaluation, are at a relatively early stage of development with limited prior research, an exploratory study that adopted an inductive

approach was chosen for this research. This approach provided the opportunity to develop a framework and gather deep insights into the actions and challenges embedded in the evaluation of SMM. It also provided structure and flexibility to ensure the coverage of key themes whilst accommodating unanticipated insights (Bryman and Bell, 2010; Saunders *et al.*, 2009; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

The study used semi-structured interviews with key informants. The interview protocol was informed by the relevant literature and was further refined through pilot interviews with four practitioners to test rigour, validity and appropriateness (Bryman and Bell, 2010). All questions were open-ended, thus not limiting the interviewee's choice of answers (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002) and were supplemented by prompts to ensure coverage of key themes associated with each stage (Creswell, 2013). In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face in the informants' offices, a setting where interviewees could elaborate and show supporting documents (Creswell, 2013). Informants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and careful attention was paid to other ethical issues (Bryman and Bell, 2010).

Sample

In identifying informants for this study, a purposive sampling approach was used to seek out information-rich cases (Patton, 1990) with key informants who were able to comment on current practice and experience in the evaluation of SMM. Such professionals have considerable experience of SMM across a wide range of clients. In total, 18 specialist marketers were interviewed (Table I), all of whom either had responsibility for SMM, or more generally digital marketing within their agency. This number of informants is consistent with other qualitative studies in this field (e.g. Veloutsou and Taylor, 2012; Wallace and Chernatony, 2007).

Using agency practitioners as key informants provides broader insights into SMM evaluation than would have been possible through direct conversations with brand owners. The specialist agencies included ranged from multi-national marketing agencies servicing global client brands, through to small and micro agencies with a UK client base, embracing UK national, regional and sector-specific brands.

During the interview process, all informants referred to more than one client brand, such that, in total, perspectives gathered during the interviews encompassed 78 brands, in

Informant	Informant role title	Size of agency	Clients	Typical client size
P1	Head of social media	SME	4	SME
P2	Head of social and SEO	Micro	4	Micro/SME
P3	Head of social media	Large/international	5	Large/international and national
P4	Digital strategy director	Large/international	4	Large/international and national
P5	Head, digital marketing	Micro	4	Micro
P6	Head of social media	Large/international	3	Large/international and national
P7	Head of social media	Large/international	5	Large/international and national
P8	Head of social media	SME	3	Large/international and national
P9	Head of social media	Micro	6	Micro/SME
P10	Head of social media	Micro	4	SME
P11	Head of digital marketing	SME	4	National and SME
P12	Head of digital strategy	SME	6	National
P13	Director	Micro	3	National
P14	Social media manager	SME	4	SME
P15	Head of digital marketing	SME	6	SME and micro
P16	Digital marketing executive	Micro	3	SME
P17	Social media consultant	Micro	2	Micro
P18	Social media consultant	Micro	3	SME

Table I.
Informant profile

the following sectors: sports, retail, automotive, drinks, hospitality, professional services, transport, and not-for-profit organisations. Client brands which were discussed in the interview were broadly classified as large (international or national), SME or microbusiness (Table I).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted in order to develop a rich description of the data set and to identify implicit and explicit ideas in the data (Creswell, 2013). Thematic analysis is appropriate in research such as this that adopts an inductive approach and seeks to construct theories that are grounded in the data (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2002). Thematic analysis followed the six phases recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the final account of the findings.

The data were initially analysed interview transcript by transcript, before checking for verification across transcripts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The analysis was completed manually supporting a closeness to the data which allowed distinctive themes to emerge and encouraged detailed knowledge of each theme (Eisenhardt, 1991). This analysis led to the identification and emergence of the six stages of the framework, challenges and responses to challenges associated with each stage (as shown in Figure 1 and Table II).

Findings

Figure 1 shows the stages of SMM evaluation that emerged from the interviews. It is presented at this point to assist in structuring the details of this section, and was not pre-determined before the interviews were conducted. In the remainder of this section, insights offered on the challenges associated with each of these stages are presented.

Setting evaluation objectives

There is a recognition that identification of specific and clear evaluation objectives, which are aligned with wider marketing, and overall business goals are vital. This is embedded in the fact that SMM is typically a component of a multi-channel marketing campaign:

[...] you would never have just a purely social media campaign unless you were a massive brand, it's typically an add-on that we sell to existing clients (P15).

Evaluation objectives act as a benchmark to help measure the performance of a firm's campaign. They are typically developed in the pre-campaign planning process and should govern the KPIs and metrics collected in assessment of campaign performance.

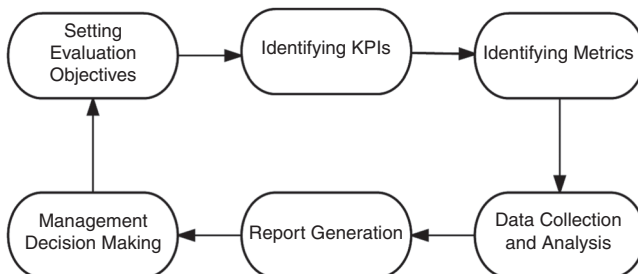


Figure 1.
Social media
marketing evaluation
conceptual framework

Framework stages	Stage definition	Challenges	Responses to challenges
Setting evaluation objectives	Identification of specific and clear evaluation objectives, which support wider marketing, and overall business goals	Lack of client understanding of social media as a marketing channel Ad or <i>post hoc</i> evaluation, without reference to specific objectives	Workshop events to further the understanding of clients knowledge of SMM in practice
Identifying KPIs	Identification of the most appropriate performance indicators which support the objectives and the campaign	Vagueness regarding specific or appropriate KPIs Iterative target setting for KPIs Linking metrics to ROI, without reference to specific KPIs	Examining previous campaign reports to clarify performance indicators, linked with successful campaigns
Identifying metrics	Identification of the specific metrics, which will need to be collected and enumerated in the evaluation process	Influence of analytical tools on metric selection Metric overload Reliance of social media platform statistics, leading to lack of transparency and instability	Utilising SM Platforms own metrics, as well as bespoke metrics relevant to the client firm
Data collection and analysis	Collection of the previously identified metrics, and KPIs from the relevant channels. Analysis will be performed at this stage elucidating the campaign behaviour and performance	Heavy level of dependence on Google Analytics and Facebook Insights Limitations of existing social media analytics tools The need to use several tools, or to develop tailored dashboards	Development of bespoke data collection systems, often in a dashboard format drawing data in from several SM points
Report generation	Compilation of the KPIs and metrics into a presentable format, highlighting the overall campaign performance with notable insights	Selecting the data for inclusion, and presenting it in an accessible format Deciding on optimal frequency of reporting, extending from real-time, through weekly and monthly Designing reports that contribute to a productive agency-client relationship, whilst also meeting contractual requirements	Consultation with clients to ascertain the most useful form of report, or reporting event
Management decision making	Evaluation reports are presented to the client enabling a reflection on the performance of the campaign as well as informing future iterations	Ensuring that reports are read and used to inform decision making for subsequent campaigns Ensuring that the decision making is a collaborative Embedding learning about social media in the agency-client consultation process	Hold regular meetings with clients to enable reflection and decision making which impacts future campaigns

Table II.
Definitions, challenges and responses associated with social media marketing evaluation framework stages

Objective setting starts with consideration of the wider business and marketing objectives and seeks to identify and align appropriate SMM objectives:

The strategy would link the business objectives through their communication and marketing objectives, to create social [media marketing] objectives (P3).

However, this process is far from straightforward. Several informants suggested that clients exhibited difficulty in articulating their SMM objectives, due to their lack of understanding of social media as a marketing channel:

At the moment, the client is not that digitally savvy and they are trying to rethink their own marketing plan and how they go about it (P4).

On occasions, this situation is resolved through meetings and negotiation:

What they would like is for us to sit down with them and have a strategy meeting where we talk about what are the most important goals and talk about how we might theoretically go about achieving them (P12).

It is evident that in this stage and other stages in the evaluation cycle, approaches vary considerably between brands. Some clients and their agencies engaged in a thorough pre-campaign process that included consideration of objectives:

We would have a workshop so that they can understand what they want and identify their aims and objectives for their business (P3).

In other instances, planning of evaluation is more ad hoc or *post hoc*, with the agency taking the initiative, often without discussion regarding the clients' marketing objectives:

I will prepare a little mini report and say Facebook fans went from this to this (P4).

Clients expect a fairly basic report, measurement isn't something they often want (P15).

Developing KPIs

Following on from setting evaluation objectives, identification of KPIs are imperative for effective evaluation of a campaign. Informants were very aware that their agency was being judged on their performance as measured by KPIs and hence very conscious of KPIs. As such, discussion of KPIs constitutes a crucial stage in the establishment of the measurement framework. Informants recognised the importance of KPIs; many informants referred to setting KPIs, often linking them to the assessment of performance, and viewing the achievement of KPIs as an indication of the agency's value to the client:

[...] we pride ourselves on really knowing our clients; we know that their key KPIs are going to be x, y and z (P5).

However, few informants could be prompted to further elaborate on specific KPIs. An exception was P11, who mentioned specific KPIs, including engagement, reach and conversions:

If we have advertising running, how much does that increase our reach? I like to see what the organic growth rate is like, what the engagement was like, how we sort of build it within the first month, then, I can forecast how it is going to go for the rest of the campaign. We would set for conversions, say month 1 in October, they got 50 social conversions.

For each KPI, a target is set. Given the relative limited previous experiences on use of SMM, target setting can be difficult. For instance, this quote from P12 suggests that target setting is not necessarily revised as campaigns evolve:

At the end of the year a lot of the targets were over-reached, as we started doing advertising and competitions and more engaging stuff, so it became apparent that the targets didn't actually mean anything.

ROI, rather than KPIs was referred to by some informants:

{The Client} wanted to see the ROI on the (SMM) campaign and to a certain degree, we can say we expect this to draw this many website visits (P4).

They {The Client} love ROI! People go into their website, making a booking which goes to sales team. The average booking will normally generate £30, so that is the figure what I have been told to work to (P16).

One campaign that was specifically designed to support calculation of ROI was mentioned:

We ran a Facebook offer, which we measured separately. That's in-store redemption only, run at one store in {Client Store}. We know how much we spent and how much was redeemed so it was easy to run stats. There was a 14% redemption rate and it cost £2.50 per person that bought something (P10).

Identifying metrics

Informants identified metrics such as the number of mentions, likes, and followers, which are widely available from social media platforms:

We do a monthly social media report. We do fans, followers, mentions (P4).

How many people are mentioning the brand. Social mentions are great because it shows it is getting the name out there (P6).

[...] these are your awareness metrics, likes, people commenting, things like that; [the customer journey is] awareness, engagement and then sales (P3).

However, another informant suggested that there too many metrics within SMM, and that this could lead to an overly speculative approach to measurement:

We make too many assumptions and there is too much guess work in social media. I like to know exactly the effects of my marketing (P5).

Although it was acknowledged that specific metrics should be chosen based on the KPIs, with a set of metrics relating to each KPI, in reality there was a reliance on statistics generated by social media platforms:

You talk about social media as your owned channels, but they're not. They are owned by Facebook or owned by Twitter, you are just being permitted to use the technology (P16).

Sometimes clients were observed to think solely in terms of these metrics, and forget about objectives and KPIs:

[...] they might say, "We want to set a goal to reach like 4,000 likes by the end of the 3-month period". That is when we have to say we can do that but that doesn't mean it has met the [campaign] objectives at all (P13).

Informants expressed their concern regarding the reliance upon statistics generated by social media platforms, and there was some scepticism regarding the value of these metrics. An associated concern related to understanding what the data means, as well as its lack of stability:

Facebook insights for apps, but it's hard to figure out what any of the stats mean because they are not really fully explained within Facebook and the problem is that Facebook is always changing (P12).

Data collection and analysis

The selection of metrics and the analysis process adopted is influenced by the social media platforms used by the informants, many of which provide their own sets of analytics. Although both Facebook Insights and Google Analytics were widely used, all informants referred to using Google Analytics as the de facto data collection tool for SMM evaluation, as identified by P7:

We'll use Google Analytics a great deal and all the lovely stuff that comes with that (P7).

Arguably, the widespread use of Google Analytics is because of its established presence in digital marketing in general, such that it allows parallel collection and analysis of data across beyond social media, e.g. websites, search engine marketing and e-mail marketing channels:

Everything we do is linked up with the SEO guys, the Google Analytics guys and the econometrics team (P3).

Facebook Insights was the second most commonly mentioned SMM evaluation tool. A variety of tools were mentioned such as: Sprout Social, Hootsuite, Brandwatch, Radian 6, BuzzMetrics, which were often viewed as supplementary to Google Analytics:

After Google Analytics we use Brandwatch mainly (P4).

I dabble, so I use Sprout Social, TweetDeck, Hootsuite and Facebook (P16).

The limitations of existing tools are driving the search for better tools:

We've just found a new tool that helps us to look at it a bit deeper and [...] we are going to change the strategy (P5).

And the simultaneous use of several tools:

No tool does everything you want in social media. If it doesn't measure real world business outcomes as well as correlate with other sets of information, it's not going to be very useful (P3).

I wouldn't use them {tools} all for one client but between them all. I do daily checks across all social media brand pages (P16).

A few informants mentioned the development of bespoke metrics/analytics dashboards. In one instance, the dashboard was built for a specific client, and incorporated both KPIs and associated metrics:

For one bigger client we have built a digital dashboard, which pulls in through the Twitter and the Facebook KPI based on what (clients) requirements are. That pulls stats every forty-eight hours from Facebook and from Twitter (P12).

Finally, it was acknowledged that metrics and tools are in a continuous state of flux, with some of these changes having potential to drive significant changes in the SMM evaluation processes:

Metrics change on such a regular basis and the Industry standards fluctuate so that much that it is so difficult to keep up (P12).

Facebook is always changing, it never stays the same. We can build something that does work for a certain period of time and then it they change! (P11).

Report generation

Once data collection is complete, reports are generated for clients. All agencies engaged with this process as part of their contractual responsibilities. Reports are compiled of the various metrics that it has been agreed with the client will be measured:

On a weekly basis for all clients, we will create a weekly set of metrics which includes follower, social growth, web site traffic referred to from our social media activity, last click revenue (P3).

Informants viewed the reporting process as an important component of ensuring a productive agency-client relationship. The nature and frequency of the process is shaped by a combination of what the client requires, and the metrics available. For example:

With {Client}, everything has to go on an A3 piece of paper. They specify that with all your slides. You have to say what you have to say within twenty seconds (P1).

{Client} are quite demanding and their requirements are very specific so that's very helpful because it does structure how we have to approach their reporting (P12).

There was some disagreement as to the optimum frequency of reporting with daily, weekly and monthly reports being provided for clients. Frequency of reporting differed with the type and size of the client. Interestingly, informants did not rely to any great extent on the reporting functions of the metrics and analytics tools (that supported data collection), but rather preferred to structure and format the report for the client. In this manner, it was easy for them to identify key trends and outcomes, and in some cases to make the link to the clients' KPIs:

We don't use anything that that just pulls the data for us because we have got an amazing tech guy who built a report that pulls metrics plus KPIs so that everything updates automatically (P11).

In most cases, SMM practitioners use statistical software, often Microsoft Excel, to combine and distil the key information from the various data sets. Although report generation tools are available, these were regarded as too expensive:

That technology is still to catch up and unless you can afford to buy one of the big tools that will do the whole report for you and you can just print it at the end of the month (P11).

Some agencies created real-time dashboards for campaign performance figures for their large clients such that the clients are able to interrogate the data sets themselves:

They do that by using the dashboards to pull the figures themselves. Every month there is a report which they go in and type some information into and then the report generates itself ready on A3 format for them to save off as a (Adobe) .pdf and then they email that to the client to talk about at their monthly meetings (P12).

In terms of the bigger clients we manage, we built digital dashboards which pull in through the Twitter and the Facebook KPI. It has been running for about a year and a half using those metrics that we agreed (P8).

Because reporting processes were part of a contractual arrangement with individual clients, there was considerable variation in reporting practices and report formats, even within one agency. Clients reporting requirements were seen to be heavily dependent on their budget:

[...] it really depends on the client and how much they will pay for the evaluation (P8).

However, because reporting was viewed as a pivotal aspect of the contractual relationship there was sometimes tension between the agency and their clients:

[Client] wanted everything quantified but I think they want us to give them a list of how much traffic it will produce so that when it doesn't they can beat us with it and not pay us (P4).

[The Client] wants monthly content plans with every piece of content. It is just absolutely crazy the level of stuff they need (P9).

Management decision making

The final stage of the SMM evaluation cycle involves discussion between the agency and their clients on the contents of the report as a basis for decision making regarding the next phase of SMM. This consultation is a collaborative event during which the performance of recent activities is discussed:

A workshop is more of a collaborative thing rather than standing up and pointing at lots of PowerPoint slides (P2).

Informants also commented that they saw their role as not simply informing, but also educating their clients, enabling both parties to reflect on the performance of the campaign as well as helping to inform future actions:

[...] if we are not entirely sure that they are ready yet [...] we would give them some training [...] what we think they should do and they make a decision off the back of that for whether they should commit to it (P6).

Basically we give them the first report, the report with their results on and then we have to go through each of the stats with them over the phone because they really wouldn't understand what any of them means (P12).

Some concern was also expressed that some SMM evaluation reports were not being read or used in subsequent decision making:

Some of them won't even look at it [...] they will circulate it in their office and no one will read it (P13).

[...] we just send it {SMM evaluation Report} over and we get nothing back (P11).

The smaller SME's that we work with, they aren't really bothered, just say thanks and keep on tweeting! (P13).

Summary

Table II summarises the findings, offering, based on the data from the interviews, a definition of each stage of the framework, the challenges discussed and approaches adopted for addressing those challenges.

Discussion and contribution

Proposing a framework and a definition of SMM evaluation

This research has established that practitioners view the SMM evaluation process to have six stages as shown in the SMM evaluation framework in Figure 1. Based on this framework, the following definition of SMM evaluation is offered as guidance for effective deployment and measurement of SMM:

Social media marketing evaluation is a strategic management process that commences with the identification of social media marketing objectives, proceeds to the selection of appropriate KPIs and metrics, involves the collection of quantitative and qualitative data, to populate metrics and generate insights, which are distilled into report format and concludes with management decision making that influences future campaign objectives and strategies.

This exploratory study offers evidence to support aspects of Jeffery's and McCann and Barlow's frameworks, as well as offering a definition of each stage. McCann and Barlow propose three key stages to SMM management: planning, implementation and evaluation, and includes a number of the activities reported in our framework but it is difficult to map this directly onto our framework. Mapping our framework and Jeffrey's is, however, instructive. Both have stages relating to objectives, KPIs, metrics as well as data analysis, however our framework also specifically considers data collection. It is in the "contextual stages" that there is the most significant divergence. Informants in this study discussed in great detail the process of report generation, whereas Jeffrey focusses to a greater extent on presenting to management. Both frameworks have a concluding management decision-making stage, but our framework does not mirror the goals and stakeholder stages of Jeffrey's framework.

This divergence is evidence that Jeffrey's framework does not significantly acknowledge that much SMM activity is managed by specialist (and often small) digital or SMM agencies.

Whilst they may have an advisory role in management decision making, goal setting and consultation with stakeholders, their involvement is variable. In other words, our framework draws important attention to the context in which SMM evaluation is undertaken.

Apart from the frameworks proposed by Jeffery and by McCann and Barlow, prior research on SMM has largely centred on metrics, analytics, and dashboards, and largely ignored the embedding of such tools into marketing decision-making processes (Cvijikj *et al.*, 2012; Heijnen *et al.*, 2013; Marklein and Paine, 2013; Pauwels *et al.*, 2009; Peters *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, informants in the research reported in this study had more to say about the later stages of the framework, than they did about setting evaluation objectives and identifying KPIs. Nevertheless, it is particularly important to contextualise the latter stages of the evaluation process. The reluctance to focus on this context may derive from the relative novelty of SMM, such that agencies, and, in particular their clients, have insufficient experience of SMM campaigns to be confident of the impact of a specific campaign. In terms of the contractual relationship between the agency and the client, both parties are therefore often inclined to feel vulnerable (Grant *et al.*, 2012).

Challenges in SMM evaluation

In addition to identifying the stages in SMM evaluation, this research offers deeper insights into the challenges associated with this process, as summarised in Table II.

As mentioned above, many of these challenges arise from the relative novelty of SMM and therefore the limited experience with SMM of both parties. This has potential to make the relationship between the agency and the client more volatile. There is a longstanding literature on agency-client relationships that assesses the challenges in this relationship, how it can be best managed, and what happens when it fails (Haytko, 2004). This literature suggests that a long terms relationship is optimal for both parties (Waller, 2004), but its focus on conflict and switching suggest that this is difficult to achieve (Davies and Prince, 2010).

In this study, throughout the various stages, informants continually referred to “the clients want [...]”, suggesting a relationship in which the client is perceived to be in control. Typically, such relationships are based on clearly drafted contracts, which include clear and attainable objectives and KPIs. In this study, there is evidence of difficulties in this arena, as well as in the stages associated with report generation and management decision making. For example, it seems that agencies find it difficult to ensure that evaluation reports are read and used to inform decision making, and are sometimes provided with little guidance from clients as to the desired style of reporting. Recent contributions to the agency-client relationship literature, suggest that collaborative planning and a co-creative approach are the best way forward (Kohtamäki and Partanen, 2016). Fan and Gordon (2014) and Töllinen *et al.* (2010) suggest that this is particularly appropriate in the context of SMM. Interestingly, there is indeed evidence of the adoption of approaches that involve collaboration in this study, as summarised in the final column in Table II. Informants, for example, report using workshops, regular meetings with clients and consultation on the most useful form of reporting.

The other main challenge that runs in parallel with the management of the agency-client relationship is the tension between the social media metrics that best align with KPIs, and the readily available social media analytics provided by most of the major social media platforms. Informants were keen to discuss at length the weaknesses of this data, arguably because the use of these tools is an integral part of their working activities, such that they were very conscious of the limitations of these tools. Key issues reported included lack of clarity as to how the analytics were created, unannounced changes in analytics and the need to integrate analytics from different social media platforms, sometimes into a tailored dashboard. No prior studies have reported on these challenges, although there is some discussion on this in the practitioner literature (Sponder, 2012).

In summary, agency-based informants feel that their main challenges in evaluation of SMM campaigns relate with working with their clients and the social analytics tools that they need to use to generate performance reports, both of which have potentially significant consequences for the success of SMM.

Conclusion

Summary

This research contributes to knowledge and theory in the area of SMM strategy. First, it proposes the SMM evaluation framework that identifies the stages in the decision making associated with the evaluation of social media campaigns: setting evaluation objectives, identifying KPIs, identifying metrics, data collection, report generation and management decision making. Furthermore, discussion with marketing practitioners has identified challenges associated with each stage in the SMM evaluation cycle. Whilst some of the challenges relate to practical considerations such as the availability of effective analytics tools, the biggest challenges lie in the evolution of the relationship between the agency and their clients, in a realm in which marketing and its evaluation continues to require learning and adaptation on the part of both agencies and clients.

Theoretical and practical implications

The SMM evaluation framework has value for both theory development and marketing decision making. In common with other theoretical frameworks, it can be used as a means of organising observations, and to simplify and abstract real world complexity (Brady and Collier, 2010).

For researchers, this framework can be used to identify gaps in the evolving body of knowledge associated with SMM and its evaluation, and to position specific contributions in this area, in relation to other aspects of the SMM evaluation process. For example, there is a growing body of work on metrics and KPIs for social media, but this is rarely contextualised with respect to other aspects of social media strategy and planning.

For practitioners, the framework can be used to guide strategic decision making and engage managers and other stakeholders, assisting them in effective communication and participation in processes associated with evaluation and strategy formulation. In particular, by identifying some of the challenges and responses used by other practitioners it offers insights associated with the development and evolution of agency-client relationships in this context.

Limitations and recommendations for further research

As indicated earlier, one of the limitations of this study is that it is based on the agency perspective. This is both a strength and a weakness; agencies are involved in seeing through the complete social media campaign and understand the technologies and processes. On the other hand, they may be less familiar with the brand that is being promoted, and, particularly in the case of smaller agencies specialising in social media, may have limited awareness of their clients' marketing initiatives through other channels. Hence, there is scope for further research from the client perspective. Further insights may also be gained through the use of other research approaches. Case studies, for example, would allow a focus on specific campaigns, with a view to generating deeper insights into the specific KPIs, metrics, analytics and their relationships and associated decision-making processes.

More generally, there is scope for further research into the strategic planning and evaluation of SMM activities and campaigns. To support both theory development and the development of effective practice, further research in the following areas is called for:

- (1) linking typical KPIs and marketing, sales and branding objectives to SMM interventions and metrics, and their contextualization within a multi-channel marketing strategy or campaign;

- (2) investigating the relationships between the SMM evaluation procedures and wider marketing planning;
- (3) evaluating the relative merits of qualitative and quantitative metrics, and the ways in which they can be used to inform future SMM strategies;
- (4) strategic decision-making processes associated with SMM; and
- (5) collaborative creative industry campaign planning involving both clients and agencies.

Finally, social media is a rapidly developing field, such that many of the specifics of SMM and its evaluation are likely to change, with the evolution of technologies and of the behaviours of social media users. So, although the overarching model developed in this research and associated challenges are likely to remain relevant emerge in future SMM practice, there is a general need for continuing research into social media strategies and their impact.

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