
A recent real-time sentiment analysis of marketing professionals in Ireland showed a striking level of negative and pessimistic thinking about the future. Donal Nugent looks at the challenges facing the profession as the era of big data emerges.

MAD MEN OR SAD MEN?

Back in what are now the good old days of marketing, when a company wanted to build awareness of its brand, the question largely centred on spend.

Billboards, TV and radio, and magazines and newspapers were the expensive, if imperfect, mediums by which the consumer was reached. While all, of course, continue to be important, the era of addressing an audience without any clear sense of who they are, or how receptive they have been to your message has, in a short space of time, simply gone out the window. Big data is the reason for this paradigm shift, with vast amounts of detailed and individualised consumer data, fed by the unstoppable rise of social media, now available to businesses through the internet.

As exemplified by sites such as Facebook and Twitter, social media provides not just broad brushstrokes, but photo-quality portraits of modern consumers. And, unlike the traditional recipient of a mass media message, Facebook's one billion users offer a two-way conversation with what they see around them, actively liking, disliking, admiring, rubbishing or just ignoring the selling efforts directed at them.

All of this has created a curious, and to many marketing professionals, unsettling paradox. On the one hand, unparalleled levels of insight about the consumer are now available; on the other, compelling reasons to translate this knowledge into the big spending marketing campaigns of the past have diminished. Bespoke promotions, built on individualised knowledge, are now the order of the day, and the fear of many is that, as big data hits its stride, the role for marketing will simply be that of handmaiden.

ADDING THE EMOTION DIMENSION

b-sm@rk is an Irish start-up company that aims to help the marketing profession navigate this new world order by putting some of the interpretative control of big data back in their hands. Through a simple-to-use interface called MySmark ('smark' is a portmanteau of 'smart' and 'mark') users can provide emotional feedback (and, therefore, brand value) as they surf the net – sharing their happiness, curiosity, boredom, frustration or even rage as they feel it. In June this year, b-sm@rk had an opportunity to share with marketing professionals just how insightful this data can be, by allowing them to test it on themselves. At a debate hosted by the Irish Marketing Society, MySmark technology monitored the sentiment of an audience of 50+ Irish marketing executives as the future of their

industry was discussed. The measurement of the emotional response to some key questions undoubtedly provide an insight that more standard reporting simply cannot offer (see graphs).

b-sm@rk founder and CEO, Nicola Farronato, says the depth of negative feeling around big data identified by b-sm@rk didn't surprise him. "We are in a moment in time where a lot of big data is coming from many different sources, but we also have to address what you could call a semantic problem with this information. If you are a marketing manager, responsible for a Facebook page with thousands of likes, the pressing question is how you can action and use this data to really understand your consumers. Big data, by itself, may not really provide you with the measures to instantly act upon the information. We see MySmark as providing data that can be used to distil the bigger picture, to filter the information and to accelerate the capability of marketing professionals to understand it."

CROSSROADS

Jacques Henry-Bezy is Managing Director of marketing consultants Bespoke and Beyond, a position that allows him to observe at first hand the rapidly changing terrain of marketing.

Jacques accepts that, for an industry that was built on the idea of marketing as a 'one-way transaction from brand to consumer', the seismic changes of the last five years have certainly presented challenges. "Marketing has not been cut out of the equation but what is unnerving for many is that marketing can no longer control a substantial part of the brand image being formed." The shift is, in effect, a power transfer that has put control in the hands of consumers. "To me, this is very positive and the brands that are winning in this environment are those that are accepting these changes and addressing them through innovation."

Jacques believes the future role of the marketing professional will centre on delivering brands that are very clear in their purpose and values. "The question 'What do consumers want?' is not a new one, but companies are listening more carefully than ever before to find the answer. Brands that have values and the capacity to answer are the ones that are winning."

In terms of responding, Jacques says "a good reflex for me is to go back to basics, to ask: what is your brand culture and brand story. The difference today is that when you tell your part of the story, you have to accept that a significant other part of the brand story will be handled by others."

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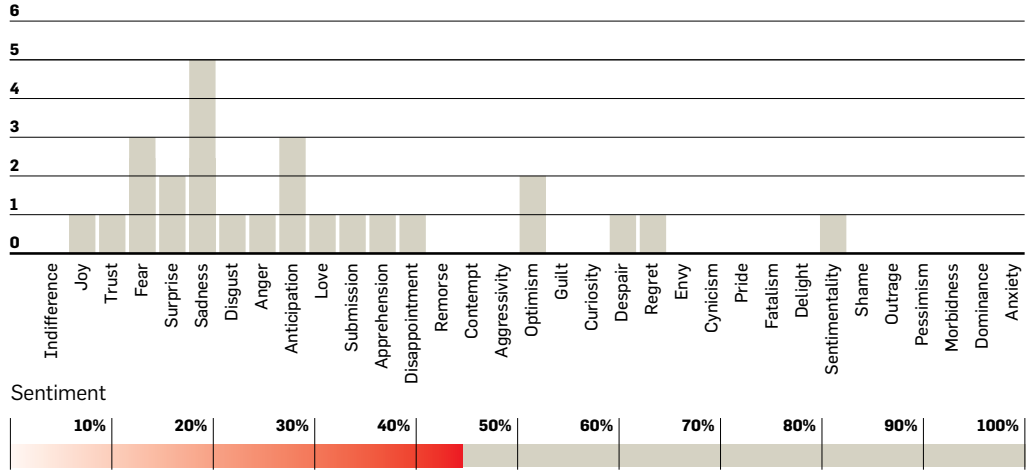
Sadness was the primary emotional response among marketing professionals to the role data has in their industry

The impact of value-driven behaviours was seen to generate considerable anger in the profession

The impact of current environmental factors on creativity was seen as overwhelmingly negative

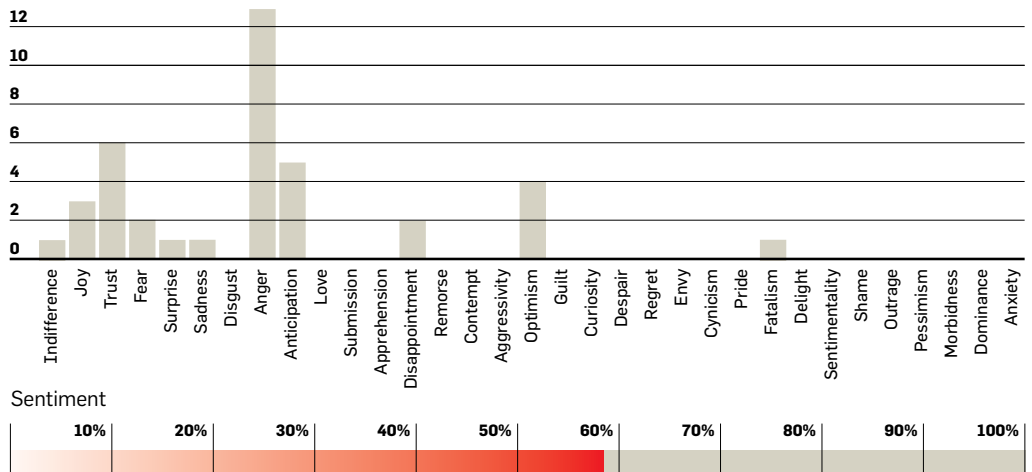
Is the abundance of data combined with high expectations that we know everything about customers, driving the industry? What role does data have now in our industry?

Number of votes: 26



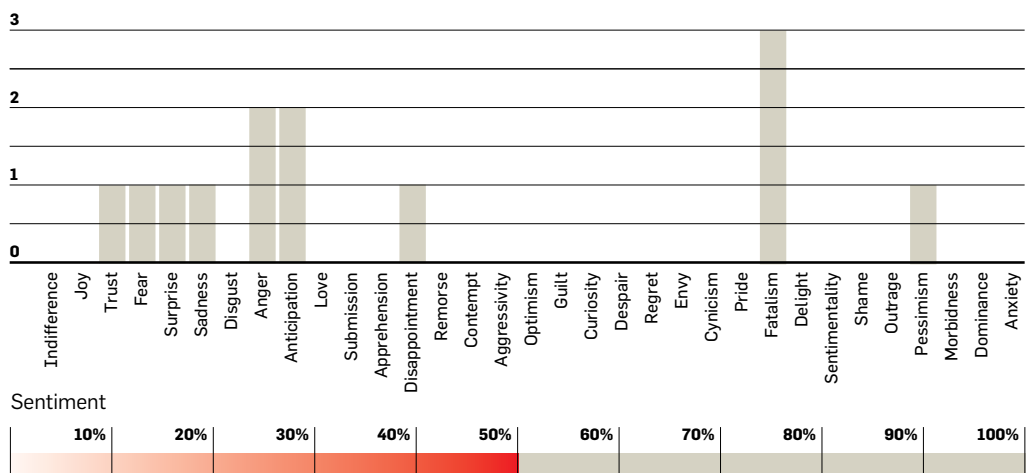
What is the influence of value-driven behaviours by consumers and buyers on marketing?

Number of votes: 36



Where does emphasis on cost, on value, on data as drivers leave creative?

Number of votes: 13





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NICOLA FARRONATO
FOUNDER AND CEO, b-sm@rk

Positioning himself among the optimists in terms of dealing with this new reality, he says the challenges need to be seen as largely structural in nature. "There is probably, at agency level, conservatism and a certain prudence that comes with a scarcity of budget, but brand owners are crying out for new ideas, for simple and effective solutions to engage in an authentic and sincere way with their consumers. With that in mind, optimism has to be on the agenda of every marketing person. More than ever, there is an equation to be solved, which is to understand what consumers want, and more than ever the limelight is on marketing as it seeks to do this."

REVOLUTION

Branding and marketing expert Noel Toolan of Naloot Ltd agrees that the shifting sands of big data have put the consumer in control now more than ever. "The whole weighting of power has changed significantly in a very short period of time. Previously, the people who controlled the capital had the power. Marketing was all about making enough noise to get the attention of the right number of people. Today, the real power is with individuals and networks of individuals. The marketing profession is trying to work out how to respond to this revolution."

While much of this change has been fed by technology, Noel says it would be a mistake to misinterpret the nature of this paradigm shift. "Marketing has always been about word of mouth and that hasn't changed. The 'old rules' in a sense never really applied – they were just about using very crude instruments to generate interest – people have always trusted their own networks more than an outside voice." Noel reflects on his

experience working with Baileys Cream Liqueur as it developed into a global brand as emblematic of this: "We understood that a brand survives and grows on word of mouth. Our marketing was actually targeted at our current users – we knew that if our most loyal customers were reassured, they would be the ones who would generate new business for us." The difference with social media, he believes, is simply that you can now do this more quickly. "Technological breakthroughs have unleashed the power to accelerate marketing – making it a lot easier to get your story out there."

The recent merger of Omnicom Group and Publicis Groupe to create the largest marketing-services company in the world is, Noel believes, evidence of fear among the old guard of the industry rather than a sign of a future pathway being formed. Instead, he predicts, the future will belong to the start-ups and the agile innovators. "Treating consumers as a monolith isn't working any more and clients see that. They see competitors who come out of nowhere, get recognised and promote their message on an individualised basis, rather than using the old stuff that costs 20 times more, and they ask 'why aren't we doing that?'"

While the issue of how the marketing industry can monetise this new reality remains an open and uncertain one, Noel, like Jacques, rejects the pessimistic response. "At the end of day, a lot of the real strength of advertising was in the creative idea. That won't change. The profession will simply reform around the creative idea and big data. At the end of the day, I believe we may be looking at a golden age of marketing. As a business model, I understand why it is frightening but it is a great time to be a creative."