

iPhone presents test case for media buyers

By Carlos Grande in London

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When your new product features on more blogs than even the US President, it seems safe to say you hit the launch marketer's goal: create awareness.

The iPhone, the multi-functional device unveiled by Apple, the US electronics group, on January 9, did precisely that.

According to Nielsen BuzzMetrics, a system which tracks English language blogs, the music, phone and web device was mentioned by more blogs than either George W. Bush or McDonald's for the next 10 days.

The product, which is not available until June, has cut a similar swathe across much so-called "Web 2.0" content-rich digital media.

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, had an iPhone entry "within minutes" of it going on show, says Isobar, a division of Aegis, the media buyer and research group.

YouTube, the video sharing website, quickly accumulated more clips for the iPhone than for Gucci, the luxury brand, or the Pope.

And a picture of the iPhone first published by Flickr, the photo-sharing website, is now the most recommended image found on Digg.com, a cult website for news and entertainment trend-spotters.

All of which makes the iPhone a test case for media buying agencies.

Though their main business remains planning and buying mass media campaigns, agencies are increasingly trying to assess how internet commentators can affect the fortunes of a big consumer product launch, in advance of any conventional marketing spend.

The answers may shape how companies market products overall.

The iPhone was also heavily reported in mainstream media, which fed online reaction. Nevertheless, its web coverage generates most interest.

Sue Moseley, managing director of Initiative Futures Worldwide, the media buyer, said: "The challenge of conventional research has always been that the minute you ask a question, you risk introducing bias because people can always be influenced by what they think you want to hear. The fantastic thing about most blogging is it is unsolicited."

Experts have long argued endorsement or criticism of brands by a third party can influence shoppers' behaviour more directly than conventional, paid-for marketing.

With an estimated 50m bloggers worldwide and increasing numbers of people logging views on social networking websites and other online communities, the internet promises to show the influencing process in action.

Reviewing products/giving feedback is now the second most popular web activity, according to a recent study by Universal McCann, media buyer.

Consumers in France, Spain, China – the world's biggest blogging market – and South Korea are particularly keen web critics. More people watching video clips online has provided fresh stimulus to consumers' opinion-forming.

Jim Kite, research director at MediaVest USA, said: "iPhone is a product you have to visualise. If people can't see a product in colour and interactively, it is now contrary to their expectations."

These developments often fuel corporate marketers' fears of losing control on the web of brands expensively nurtured through planned and paid for advertising and PR campaigns.

For media researchers, however, the same web trends could provide a valuable new source of consumer data.

There are publicly available tools to analyse this such as Technorati, a website which trawls and organises blogs and other consumer-generated content, and can measure favourite internet topics.

But media buyers are having to invest in their own systems. To try to provide advertisers with real insights, they need to sift positive from negative comments, identify the most influential web commentators, and come up with ways to reach them with the advertiser's message. It is no easy task.

By using a specialist technology partner and human analysts, Initiative has produced a very early snapshot of iPhone web opinion. The results are more polarised than the mainstream coverage the device received.

Bloggers praise its aesthetic appeal and design, and to a lesser extent its ability to combine music, telephony and web surfing.

But this has been outweighed by many concerns: about price; about Apple's decision to partner exclusively in the US with a single carrier, Cingular, which means people in non-Cingular areas wouldn't be able to use the iPhone; and anxieties about the phone's technological specification.

Initiative stresses its sample is small and bloggers are naturally technology enthusiasts and opinionated. It should also be added bloggers haven't actually used the iPhone.

Nevertheless, Dan Calladine, Isobar's head of research, found a similar pattern: "Initially, the buzz [about the iPhone] was all positive. Then people started to ask questions about it."

Like many researchers, Mr Calladine draws an analogy with the film industry in order to attempt to understand how Apple and other brands can exploit pre-launch online "buzz".

He said: "In films, people know something is coming out months in advance.

The studios stoke this enthusiasm by releasing stills, trailers and behind the scenes clips.

"Apple now has the same task: manage anticipation. My guess is they will keep releasing stills and other material in coming months and then allow select bloggers and journalists some early trials to ensure the stories keep coming."

For all brands, the bigger long-term question may turn out to be how web commentators – often collectively a large voice, but individually reaching very small audiences – feed back into the offline mainstream.

At MediaVest, Mr Kite has used TalkTrack, a system run by the *Keller Fay* consulting group, to monitor trends across all media including face to face in real-world and web conversations about the iPhone.

He also gleaned more anecdotal evidence when a software engineer came to his home and raved about the device.

Mr Kite: "He is someone who is going to visit a lot of homes and tell a lot of people. He's an influencer . . . The web is a good indication of how conversations are starting – but you have to look at the whole picture."

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