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ADVERTISING

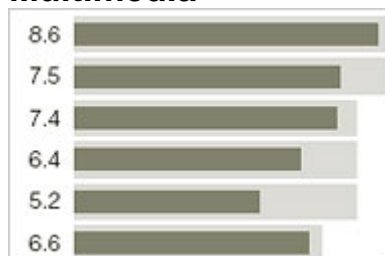
What We Talk About When We Talk About Brands

By LOUISE STORY

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One day last June, a 29-year-old graduate student in South Dakota had more than 21 conversations as she scurried through her day. She discussed [Donald Trump](#)'s wealth with her boyfriend and suggested to her best friend that she should audition for "The Apprentice." Old Navy clothes, she complained, were cut rather large. And during a phone conversation, she told her mother she would really like her to buy more Crystal Light rather than Coke. During the course of this daily chatter, the woman discussed 17 brands.

Multimedia



Graphic

[On the Tips of Their Tongues](#)

Consumer brand companies have long wished they could find a way to eavesdrop (legally) on customer conversations. Marketers can easily read Internet blogs, chat rooms and social networking sites, but what people say over coffee or across their cubicle remains largely unknown.

"The majority of word-of-mouth happens in areas devoid of microphones or cameras or any other means of actually tracking conversations," said Jamie Tedford, senior vice president of media

and marketing innovation for Arnold Worldwide, an advertising agency owned by [Havas](#). “It’s the biggest challenge in the industry.”

A new word-of-mouth research firm, the Keller Fay Group, is attempting to demystify chatter in the offline world. Since April, the firm has interviewed 100 different people a day, including the South Dakota graduate student. In return, the participants receive points that can be redeemed at places like stores and restaurants.

Keller Fay asks people to keep a diary of conversations that mention products or brands and later asks them to recount details. Six months and more than 18,000 people later, Keller Fay is marketing its data to companies as a unique window into consumers’ heads.

“When you talk about engagement, as a lot of marketers are, people talking about your brand is the ultimate engagement,” said Ed Keller, the chief executive of Keller Fay and also president of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association.

Word-of-mouth marketing has grown in popularity in recent years. But most of it focuses on generating buzz among consumers — often by distributing free products. Keller Fay aims to understand what customers are saying on their own.

On average, Keller Fay finds that people discuss about a dozen brands each day. The most discussed brands are media and entertainment products like movies, TV shows and publications. But many people also discuss food products, travel brands and stores. [Target](#), K-Mart, Sears, [J. C. Penney](#), Gap, Victoria’s Secret and [Wal-Mart](#) rank among the retailers most frequently mentioned.

More often than not, people have positive things to say about products, usually after being asked for a recommendation, Mr. Keller said. People most often say positive things about personal care and household products. The most often criticized are financial services firms and telecommunications companies.

The diaries, while often brief, provide a glimpse of the world that might be useful to sociologists and future historians. Wal-Mart figures prominently.

A 44-year-old woman in Ohio said in her diary: “We refilled my prescription and then went shopping for a new grill at Wal-Mart.” A Michigan woman in her mid-60s said she chatted about Wal-Mart over lunch one day when her friend was “showing off her cheap purse.”

In upstate New York, a 21-year-old woman went shopping at Wal-Mart for “the new baby.” And, in April, a 41-year-old woman in North Carolina said, “let’s go to Wal-Mart to get your stuff for Iraq.”

While some people said they wished Wal-Mart would stop opening more stores, others defended the discount retailer. A 42-year old man from northern California said, “the anti-Wal-Mart people are missing the big picture.”

Those who listen in on conversations should be willing to tolerate criticism. Many companies avoid hearing what customers are saying because they do not want to hear complaints, said Todd Tweedy, chief executive of BoldMouth, a word-of-mouth marketing agency in Charlottesville, Va. “Some advertisers just aren’t ready to be more customer-facing,” Mr. Tweedy said.

BoldMouth has joined with a software company, BuzzLogic, to create a product available in January that will help companies monitor what people say about them on Internet sites. Tracking consumer chatter, though, does not always provide companies with solutions, said Heather Dougherty, senior retail analyst for Nielsen/NetRatings.

“Everyone knows that word of mouth is important, and it’s something that goes on all the time,” Ms. Dougherty said. “But being able to really harness it can be very difficult.”

Word-of-mouth research shows that ads do generate consumer attention. About half of the people who mention products also mention an ad, promotion or article they saw about that company. People say, though, that their conversations with their friends are more credible than advertisements.

Product mentions come up seamlessly in Keller Fay's records. When people were not busy proclaiming, "I love my [iPod](#)," they were often debating whether young people really need iPods. One 14-year-old boy noted that he wanted a green or silver iPod, but he had to have his name on the back, "just in case it gets stolen."

The cost of a gallon of milk led a 41-year-old mother in Flint, Mich., to say that "the kids prefer Kraft cheese, particularly macaroni and cheese." A 21-year-old woman in Pennsylvania talked about a Kraft online fitness and meal plan.

Many consumers keep it simple when discussing brands. In Michigan, an 18-year-old man said last spring: "Easy Mac is good and fast." But sometimes larger and more complex issues come into play. In May, a 45-year-old woman in Pennsylvania started talking with a co-worker about Kraft and ended up discussing "the pros and cons of genetically modified foods and the lack of accountability of these companies to educate the consumers of our country."

Mr. Keller said that companies could use word-of-mouth research to guide their advertising process. For example, he said, Keller Fay recently ran a search through a database of diary entries for a luxury goods company to see what consumers were saying about it. It turned out that people with high incomes were not talking about the brand, but people who made less money were talking about it a lot. The luxury goods company, which Mr. Keller would not identify, now plans to refocus its advertisements to reach wealthier customers.