

# When Should You Listen to Consumers?

## *Understanding the Who Behind the What with Social Intelligence*

By: Jeni Chapman, EVP Harris Interactive Global Brand and Communications Consulting

As researchers and marketers, we have learned that in this brave new world of co-creation and one-on-one marketing we need to listen more. The rocket-fire adoption of social networking as a way for people to interact and talk about their lives (and our brands and products within that context) has accelerated this need. The rise of Facebook as a medium for social interaction has only increased the need to listen – from January 2008 to July 2010, adoption of Facebook has gone **from 65 billion page views per month** to approximately **three trillion page views per month** (Facebook Engineering). And companies with Facebook pages have grown with everyone from Starbucks to Skittles to IBM investing in their presence. Currently 1.5 million businesses have active pages on Facebook and 20 million people become fans of Facebook pages every day.

In a **recent Harris Interactive poll** (full disclosure, I work for Harris Interactive) we have seen the effects of this adoption with an amazing 60% of consumers on social networks saying they know what's going on in friends' lives even though they do not personally interact with those friends. In addition, more than 2 in 5 Americans stated they prefer social media to face-to-face interaction with acquaintances.

Given this, “listening” is clearly critical in this fragmented world where the Internet grows in pervasiveness through the proliferation of access via mobile phones, tablets and other devices.

But the question remains, how do we know when to listen to consumers and when not to?

Take two recent examples of brands that received a significant amount of attention in social media circles for their marketing initiatives. One was the Unilever Mad Men campaign – a series of ads that included the following iconic brands - Dove, Breyers, Hellman's, Klondike, Suave and Vaseline; and second was fervent social media “tumult” which resulted in Gap retracting their recently launched logo in less than 5 days.

In the first case, Unilever picked the second episode in the fourth season of "Mad Men" to launch the campaign, which is akin to an advertising miniseries. As an AdAge article in August stated, “the first reactions from viewers and bloggers haven't been positive, with some complaining about how the ads too closely mimic the show.” There were additional comments and criticisms among pundits and in the social media “chatter.”

With the Gap logo launch, there was the same outcry; in addition, numerous call outs and protests were posted on the company's Facebook page and on Twitter. However, according to a survey commissioned by AdAge among [1,000 consumers](#) some 80% said they had no idea the logo had changed. And as one post summarized, “Gap may have been quick to react to the outcry of a smaller, yet louder demographic. *Social media is a great tool, but can amplify the voices of a*

*smaller, more vocal group.* The question is whether their voice represents the opinions of Gap's larger target market segment. By anwarhaneef | Chicago, IL [October 21, 2010 12:53:11 pm](#)”

As someone who works every day helping clients use research to inform their branding decisions and amplification decisions, I decided to use data that we have through our Harris Poll Research Lifestreaming Panel to answer the question, “How do we know if what we are hearing represents the opinions of your target customers?”

First, we looked to confirm if real people (not only bloggers, marketers and brand fanatics) were talking about each marketer's perceived misstep.

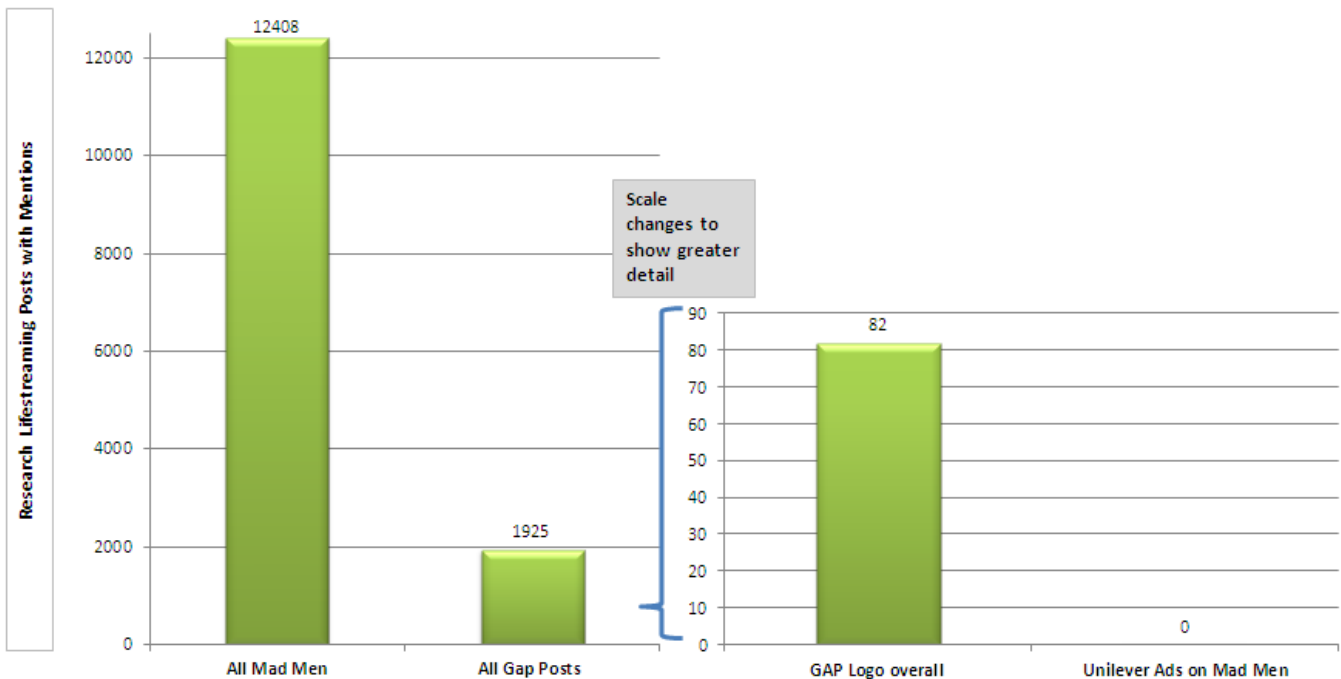
One of the unique features of our data is that we get at real consumer conversations. We not only collect comments that are publicly available on places like Twitter and Facebook, but through our panel, we can yield the brand dialogues happening on Facebook and Twitter that are not publicly available, making this capability different from any other social-media monitoring currently in the marketplace. And since most normal people are talking on Facebook with their friends and family, but not necessarily posting comments, writing blogs or giving reviews, we are able to

explore and deliver insight based on the “real” postings of everyday people. By virtue of being panel based, we can profile these dialogues by demographics such as sex, age, income, region, and brand loyalty among other targeting metrics.

However with Gap, we saw that there was indeed a spike in conversations during the logo launch related specifically to the logo and that the sentiment was negative overall.

On the other hand, we quantified that while specific comments about the logo increased,

**Chart 1**

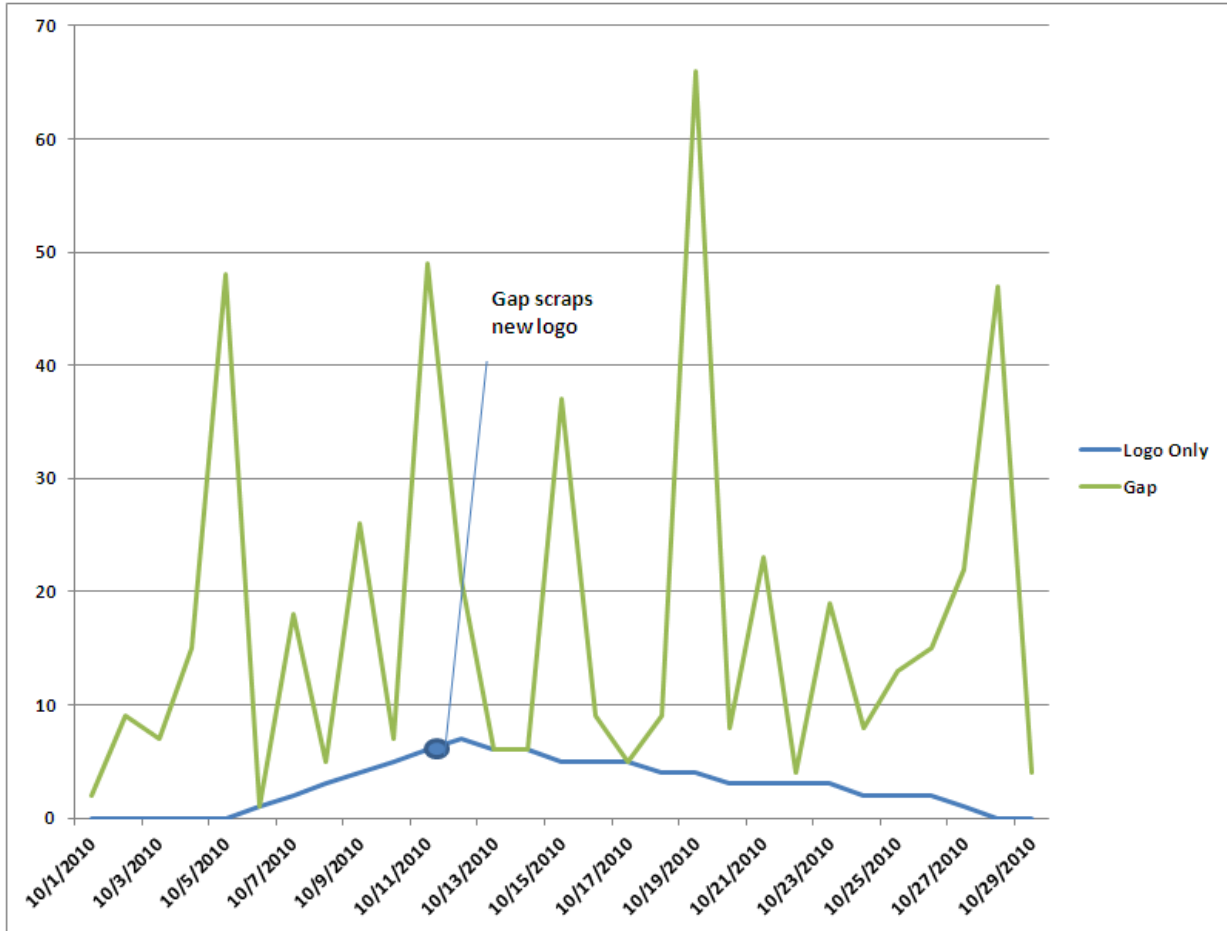


Source - Harris Interactive Research Lifestreaming Panel

In the case of “Mad Men” – while we had extensive posts about the show, only one post concerned the Unilever ads. Essentially we identified that in the case of Mad Men all the conversation in social media was not by typical consumers; real people were not talking about the ads with family or friends. See **chart 1** above.

the comments around the logo debacle represented only 16% of all conversation about Gap in the month of October. See **chart 2** below.

Chart 2



Source - Harris Interactive Research Lifestreaming Panel

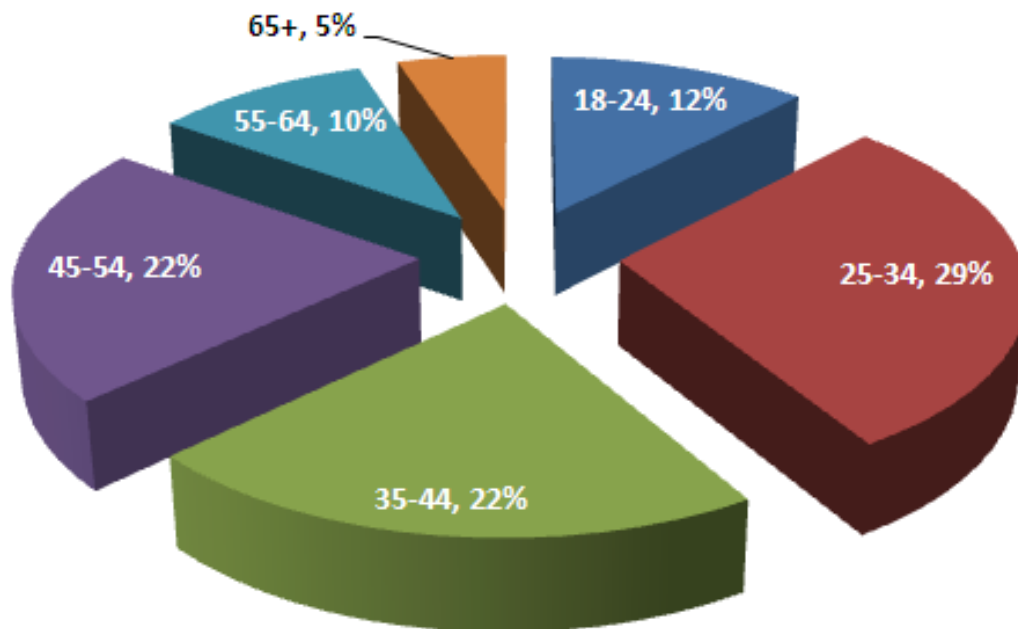
Now to answer the other question – were those postings representative of their target market? See **chart 3** below.

Chart 3 shows that over 40% were 35 years of age and older and that 29% of Gap posters were 25-34... while only 12% were from the Gap’s core target market of 18-24 year olds.

We know that groupthink exists. It is a well documented phenomenon: if everyone is attacking something, people will feel freer to join that POV and vice versa. So managing a brand by the whims of the crowd is not a long-term strategy (hey, just think how well that worked for the French Revolution).

In the case of Gap, we were able to see that Gap was hearing the outcry of many customers that “were” rather than “are” We

Chart 3



Source - Harris Interactive Research Lifestreaming Panel

saw that there was a segment of “real people” that were talking about the logo but it was by no means everyone. Those who were talking were both vocal and loud - a testament to the historical equity of the brand- but the outcry was from many that are not part of their core target market of today.

Maybe the whole thing was about reaching out to their customers of yesterday and bringing them back into the franchise? Only time will tell, but we can take away some lessons learned on how to use social media or rather social intelligence - to inform marketing/branding decisions:

**Principle 1** – Listen, but make sure you know the magnitude.

**Principle 2** - Determine if those talking about your brand or product actually represent your core franchise; the voices of the “connected” or loyal consumer are important but may not always represent your wider customer group.

**Principle 3** - Create a two-way dialogue with those who talk about your brand; dive in deeper to understand what is driving their opinions. At the risk of stating the obvious - have them come along the journey with you and use research that is socially intelligent to get input. Socially intelligent research expands your ability to understand the opportunities and challenges of the changes you want to make to the brand.