

Why Monitoring Buzz is Critically Important in New Product Launches

Continuous monitoring of social media and online traditional media, combined with survey research, provides insight into the success of new technology products such as the new tablets. Andy Wand and Michael Allenson of Maritz Research, together with evolve24, Maritz' Social Media Monitoring subsidiary, look at how bringing social media into market analysis can help brand owners optimise their marketing campaigns.

There was no shortage of new tablet computing devices unveiled at the Consumer Electronics Show. Neither was there a shortage of predictions about how these new products will impact the tablet market and its current dominant player, the Apple iPad. Some industry watchers say that it's too early to tell what impact these new products will have. But, maybe not?

Established products don't require market research to identify whether a product is a raving success or an utter failure. But, for new products, social media monitoring coupled with survey research can help product managers and marketers maximize success and make well-founded, informed decisions.

We have learned that when it comes to purchasing new consumer technologies such as tablet computers or smartphones, US consumers are now relying more on online content to help them decide what they should buy. Recently, Maritz Research and its social media monitoring subsidiary, evolve24 set out to understand how traditional online and social media are influencing growth and consumers' purchase decisions in the tablet and smartphone categories.

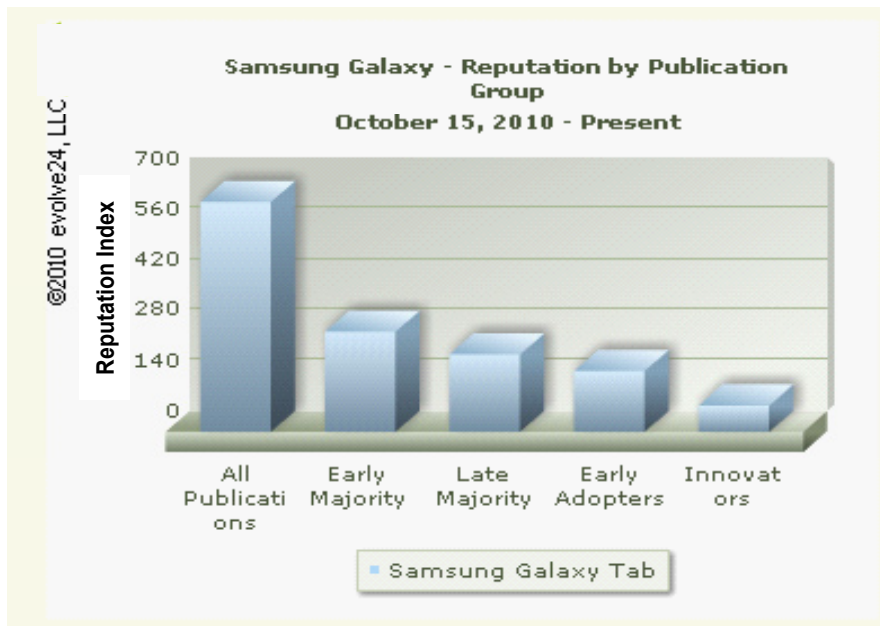
We monitored online media and surveyed over 3,000 US consumers from October to December 2010. The focus was the nascent tablet market as well as the evolving smartphone market. The consumer survey looked at the awareness and consideration of tablets and smart phones among those who recently purchased or plan to in the near future, asking about devices that are currently available, as well as items that have been announced, but not yet released. To identify these buyers, Maritz and evolve24 used a combination of social media identification (looking for users mentioning they were interested in or buying the phones on Twitter or Facebook) and surveys done among consumer panels.

Social Media and Online Discussions Heavily Influence Purchase Decisions

How does a product get high levels of consideration without having done any advertising or other direct-to-consumer marketing? We found that social media can act as an amplifier for launch, and that the reach and potential influence of individual 'prosumers' can shape the success of product launches.

In the survey, we asked consumers how they learn about products and what sources are influential in driving their consideration. For tablets, as well as for smartphones, review websites are a crucial source of information that consumers are using to help shape their product choices. This includes blogs, forums, and social networks as well as 'professional' review sites (and even these are chock-full of reader comments and opinions). For tablets, review sites rank 2nd in importance behind only word of mouth from friends and family.

The social media conversation is incredibly diverse, and all online commentators are not equal. Weighting the online comments appropriately to identify trusted influencers for each audience segment adds an extra dimension of predictive power. Evolve24 identifies and tracks the views of opinion-formers, including both media experts and influential 'prosumers'. In the case of the Samsung Galaxy Tab (launched in October 2010), this measurement revealed that, while viewers were generally pretty positive, the most cutting-edge consumers were less enthusiastic. If Samsung had managed to convince these 'influentials', then they might have been even more successful in building interest in the Galaxy Tab.



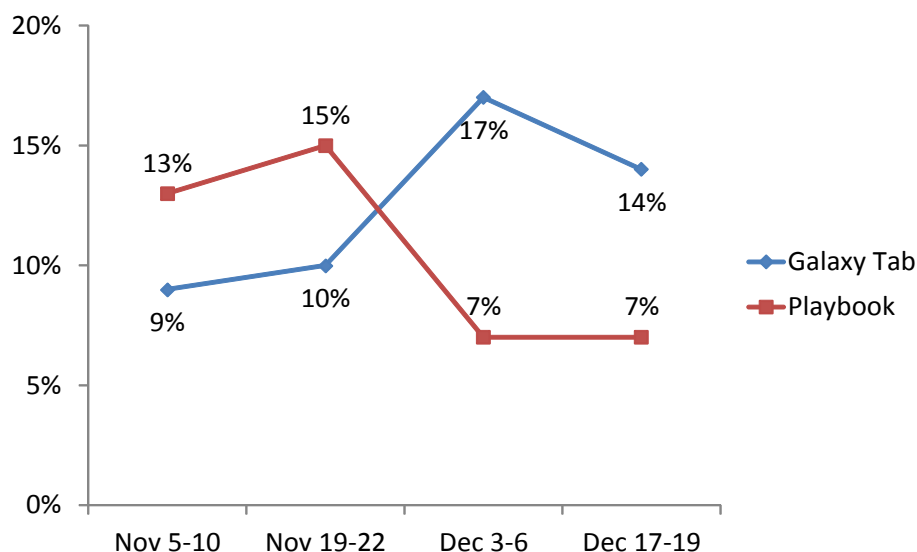
There is now a visible pathway from Launch Focused Communication to Early Product Demand

Social media monitoring of the BlackBerry Playbook and the Dell Streak show that in advance of their launch, both products are generating buzz. Survey data quantifies the level of interest in their products generated during this period. Sentiment in social media can be compared with survey data to determine the degree to which the social media conversation reflects the buying population.

Neither product has been advertised directly to the consumer. Both products were “announced” with a campaign focused on channel partners and influencers. Yet purchase interest in the BlackBerry Playbook reaches double digits in November, only to fall off in December. Since the buzz peaked well before the product was launched, it may not have the impact of a more closely-timed campaign.

Which specific Tablet models did/are you considering? BlackBerry Playbook vs. Samsung Galaxy Tab

Asked among those in the market for a tablet computer



Products can and do generate both buzz and purchase intent among consumers based on PR and other launch focused communication alone as in the case of the BlackBerry Playbook. In part, this is a function of consumers being influenced by social media – and consulting social media for information, just as they have always consulted trusted friends and family members. Monitoring social media conversations, the impact these conversations have over time, and mapping that against corporate advertising and public relations efforts can help a company assess the success of its efforts and hone its launch formula to maximize success.

Marketers interested in a successful product launch must capitalize on this social media support. Key questions to consider include:

- How soon before I launch my product should I begin publicity efforts?
- Who are my core influencers, including key commentators, bloggers, tweeters and conversational early adopters?

Integrating data to build a more complete picture

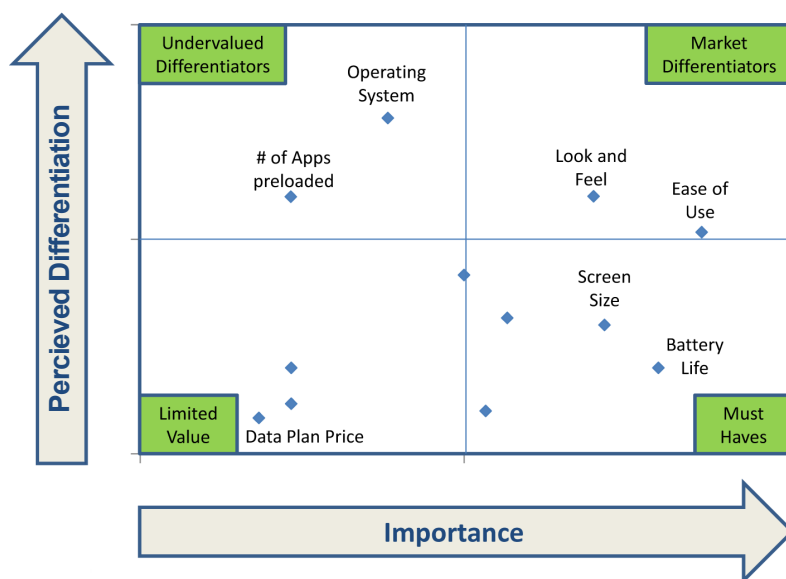
In our survey we ask which features are most important in making their decision to choose a specific product brand. But relative importance is not enough. A product manager needs to understand whether their products are perceived to be superior or differentiated from competition on features that are important to consumers.

The grid below shows those features that consumers say are most important in choosing between the tablets available and the degree of differentiation they perceive on those attributes. The look and feel of the device is the one of the most important features and it is also one of the most differentiating. This may reflect the early stage of this product category and the high level of innovation – people wanting to look cool with an iPad! Over time this feature may or may not remain important or highly differentiated.

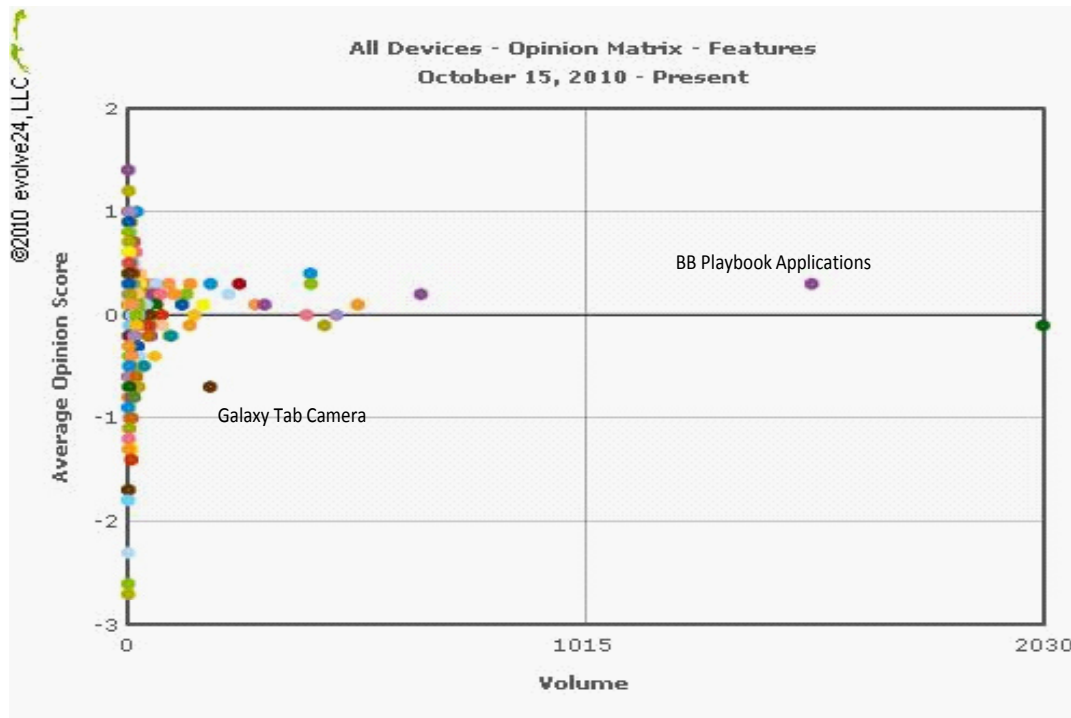
Screen size is the third most important feature for tablets, but is far less differentiating than ease of use or the look and feel of the device. Conversely, operating system is ranked less important, but is highly differentiated. Until recently, operating system simply didn't matter in phones, but with the rise of apps for purchase and other software and services that are OS-specific, and strong degree of perceived differentiation this is a potential area for marketers to exploit.

Feature Importance vs. Perceived Differentiation Among Tablets

Source: Survey Data



Social media can assess which features are being talked about, how much volume there is and whether positive stories are being told. And because insight can be obtained from social media in real time, this gives a product manager the power to be hyper-responsive in fine-tuning campaigns. The chart below shows that BlackBerry Playbook Applications are heavily discussed in social media and the sentiment is generally positive. Conversely, the conversation about the Galaxy Tab camera is more negative.



Integrating social media monitoring alongside more conventional survey data provides significant insight into how successfully a new product's benefits are being communicated to the market – and how the impact of comments around key topics stacks up against competitor products. Combining what is being said online with other types of research gives brand owners a particularly valuable and up-to-the moment picture of the market, as in the case of the tablet. We, therefore, urge marketers to maximise insight by integrating all the sources of information available to them.

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