

Your Consumer's Virtual World

A Whole New Consumer Immersion Opportunity

BY DANIELA ILIEVA

Social media and consumer immersion are both hot topics in the field of market research. This viewpoint examines the opportunity to blend social media and consumer immersion techniques to add a new dimension to traditional market research.

Today, most consumers live in two worlds. They not only exist in the traditional physical world, but they also communicate, interact, shop, share and essentially “live” in a virtual world. Companies and marketers who only perform consumer immersion studies in the physical world – going into the homes, work spaces, and play areas to gain insight about people’s habits and needs – miss out on a significant part of the consumer’s life. By ignoring the virtual world where they shop, blog, update, and interact, marketers are overlooking a major part of the world in which today’s consumers live.

Social Media is an Untapped Resource

Today’s consumers put themselves “out there.” They communicate through blogging; posting status updates, pictures and videos; participating in discussion forums; and shopping and reviewing products online. However, many companies aren’t capturing this information or applying it to their innovation and product development processes. A recent Social Product Innovation study conducted by Kalypso showed that 56 percent of participating companies use social media in less than 5 percent of their innovation initiatives; and only 3 percent of the respondents use social media in more than 50 percent of their innovation initiatives.

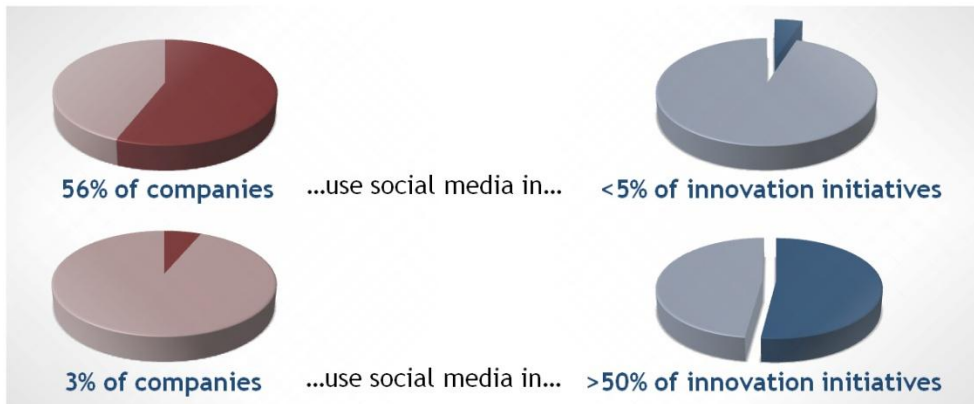


Figure 1: Companies using social media in their innovation initiatives

Many of the interviewed participants said their companies use social media primarily as an outbound communications channel to create awareness about products and services and less for inbound marketing and market research. However, many of those using social media in the front end of innovation (FEI) to collect new ideas and product requirements are realizing its power and reaping the benefits from their efforts – 46 percent of respondents using social media in FEI processes said they gained *more* new product ideas or requirements from social media. More importantly, almost that many (43 percent) claim to have benefited from *better* new product ideas or requirements.

Many of those using social media in the front end of innovation to collect new ideas and product requirements are realizing its power

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Some of the social media resources these companies are utilizing include:

- **Visual media sources** such as [YouTube](#), [Vimeo](#), [Flickr](#), [Howcast](#) and others provide pictures and videos on how consumers use products and where they are used in their homes. You can even explore what is in people's purses, cars, fridges, etc. Consumers offer their unsolicited opinions on how to choose and use products, how to perform specific functions, and information on malfunctions and defects, all of which can be valuable in identifying consumer needs and planning for product enhancements.
- **Textual social media** sources such as [Facebook](#), [Blogger](#), [Wordpress](#), [Twitter](#) and others allow people to describe even the minute details of their daily lives and their thoughts and opinions in a wide variety of lengths.
- **Commercial social media monitoring platforms**, which review large numbers of social media sites, aggregate and analyze the content, and offer insights that can help you better understand and influence your target audience.
- **Product-oriented forums and e-tailers' websites** that enable people who are passionate about a specific product or service join, interact and write consumer reviews. This forms a spontaneous thought leader network where people engage in passionate discussions, which can supply additional insights to consumer research. The benefit for market researchers is that they do not have to ask questions and drive the conversation. Consumers start the conversation and build off one another, which can provide a stream of valuable content on a topic.


If existing social network communities do not suit your needs, there are numerous online platforms, which you can use to create your personal network around specific interests or a niche audience.

Participate and Engage to Succeed

As with traditional consumer immersion, not everything you see and learn about the consumer may be pertinent to the specific research at hand. In order to stay focused and get the most out of the social media universe, it is important to:

- **Participate** by observing and listening first. Virtual consumer research should start with a clear understanding of the target consumer and her place in the virtual world. Spend time to better understand the various social media sources available, the participants and the conversations that take place to be able to determine the tools used by your target demographic. Social media can be a live stream of insights, provided you find the mediums used by your consumers.
- **Engage** by becoming an active participant, connecting and interacting with other participants in public or private online social networks and forums. Solicit feedback and ask questions as a member - not as a market researcher who can be viewed as an intruder - to increase your chances of engaging in productive conversations and receiving honest feedback from people.

Social media can help you understand how consumers view your latest product, learn how consumers rate the features of competitive products, or engage in a conversation about new product ideas. Market researchers can mine social media and actively interact with target consumers and use the findings to enhance their consumer research.



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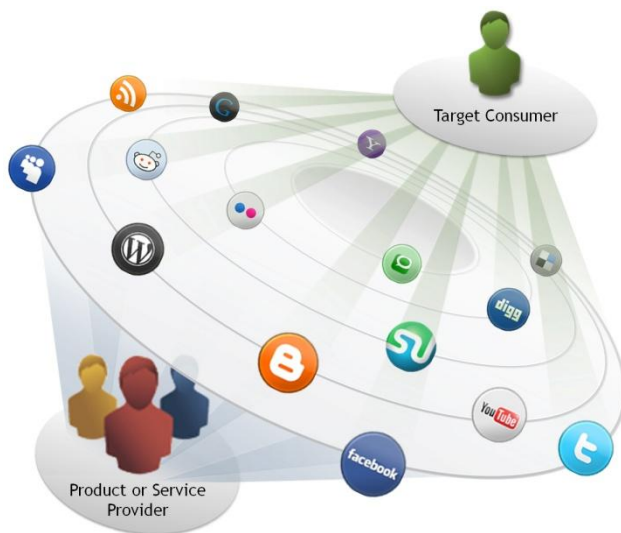
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Execute Holistic Consumer Immersion

A recent “front end of innovation” program designed by Kalypso for one of its CPG clients in the premium candle business created a truly holistic consumer immersion experience by blending the physical and virtual and gaining consumer insights from both. Consumer immersion participants visited homes and spas, talked to interior designers, and combed the Internet to collect insights that could be used to identify, define, and clarify consumer needs for new premium candle products.

As part of the social media experience, participants became members of interior design forums (e.g. [HGTV message board](#), [Decorating Diva](#), [Flickr group pools](#)) to learn about current hot trends like green design and to engage in discussions with design experts. Additionally, participants connected with prime prospects - via blogs targeted to moms - to learn about their primary safety concerns, design desires, buying habits and other candle related topics. The results from the virtual research were used to complement and enhance the physical interactions with consumers and gain a deeper understanding of the prime target’s needs.

The insights collected through the consumer immersion were further refined via a series of rapid prototyping session involving target consumers. As the company is taking the ideas



through its new product development and commercialization process, it is considering additional social media efforts including connecting with consumers via blogs, interest groups, and consumer websites to understand how they view the product a few months after launch, as well as utilizing search engines and monitoring platforms to scan for early problems and feedback on the new products.

Figure 2: Connecting with consumers via social media

Stop Watching and Start Engaging

Social media holds great potential for consumer research. It provides a continuous stream of valuable unsolicited content and context, which can bring additional insights to market and consumer research. Do not leave inspiration and immersion activities one dimensional. The virtual world of social media is full of valuable insight. People are creating, sharing and showing off, and with the advent of the latest technology and blogs, everyone can be an expert in his own world. So, stop just merely observing and start engaging in your consumer’s virtual world.



Case example from a design services firm that used social media to recruit people to provide feedback on product packaging:
“The total cost was 1,600 GBP plus the cost of postage as compared to a comparable focus group which would be 5,000 GBP and would require 6-7 groups to get to the right demographic”

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