# How Measuring Consumer Conversations Can Reveal Advertising Performance

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Generating "buzz" is a marketing objective for many Super Bowl advertisers, but "buzz" as a campaign objective should not be limited to big tent-pole events like the Super Bowl. It should be a key objective for all advertising. Fifteen years ago, researchers estimated word-of-mouth (WOM) could triple the value of advertising through a "ripple effect" (Hogan, Lemon, and Libai, 2004). The current study confirms the theory that there is a close and valuable relationship between WOM and advertising success, and it further examines that relationship as a reason to make it a campaign objective and a key part of the measurement of advertisement performance.

### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between consumer conversation and sales is the predicate that gives marketers a reason to care about driving positive conversations about their brands. Most marketers are interested in driving conversations, although responsibility for this often does not reside in the advertising department. More often, the customer service team is charged with super-pleasing customers by driving up a company's "net promoter score"; the public relations team employs "earned" media tactics to generate "buzz"; or the social-media team leverages content marketing and online influencers.

The interrelationship can be very valuable (Fay and Larkin, 2017), and advertising and analytics should embrace both offline and social-media metrics as key advertising performance indicators.

Conversation metrics potentially are more powerful than other indicators of advertising success, such as *USA Today*'s annual Super Bowl Ad Meter, which relies on consumers' evaluation of advertisements, or viewing and sharing levels on YouTube. The stimulation of conversations and sharing in social media also may be a valuable indicator, but not a replacement, for real-world conversations resulting from advertising exposure.

# Management Slant

- Conversation and social sharing are universal forms of brand engagement that not only indicate
  a successful advertisement, but also extend the reach of advertisement messages through social
  networks.
- Extending earlier findings on social sharing's impact on advertising, the researchers' analytics
  estimated that, on average, 25 percent of advertising's impact involves the stimulation of
  conversations.
- Conversation uplift is an important supplement to more traditional forms of advertising
  effectiveness. It represents an immediate behavioral response that works for both short and long
  purchase-cycle categories.
- Marketers should think holistically about conversations, whether they occur online or offline.

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"Buzz" or "word of mouth" (WOM) here refers to an uplift in the number of consumer conversations, including those that happen online—in social media—or offline, in face-to-face discussions. Uplifts in conversations are valuable to advertisers because of two important data relationships (Fay, Keller, Larkin, and Pauwels, 2019):

- on average, 19 percent of consumer purchases can be attributed to conversations about brands occurring offline (10 percent) and online (9 percent);
- on average, 25 percent of conversations can be associated with advertising expenditures, indicating a two-step flow in which advertising leads to conversations, which lead to sales.

These data relationships were estimated through an attribution modeling effort involving online and offline conversation data for 501 brands, with a deep focus on 21 of those brands, modeled against weekly advertising expenditure and consumer purchase data (Keller and Pauwels, 2018).

The online social data are based on "social listening" for brand mentions on Twitter, consumer review sites, blogs, and forums. The offline conversation data are drawn from a continuous online survey that measures unaided day-after recall for brands in 15 diverse categories. Virtually no correlation between online and offline conversations were found (Fay and Larkin, 2017). Trends in social media about brands move independently of offline conversations about brands.

It is for this reason, and the fact that they each contribute about equally to sales and other business outcomes, that marketers need to measure both online and offline conversations. Failure to do so can lead marketers to believe advertising and marketing activities are working when the impact is limited to a rise in Twitter activity only, or they may not recognize a successful campaign that is working offline but not resonating in social media.

# **MEASURING ADVERTISING EFFECTIVENESS**

Advertisers have a variety of tools for assessing the impact of advertising. Among them are measuring attention (Charron and Varan, 2019), engagement (Calder, Isaac, and Malthouse, 2018), recall (Vaughan, Beal, and Romaniuk, 2016), brand image (Driesener and Romaniuk, 2006), and sales impact (Bellman, Nenycz-Thiel, Kennedy, Hartnett, and Varan, 2019).

The current trend is toward measuring behavioral responses to advertising, whether measured through actual purchase (Wood, 2009) or physiological responses—heartbeat, eye movements, etc. (Stipp, 2015; Kennedy and Northover, 2016) or online engagement, such as likes, comments, shares, etc. (Calder and Malthouse, 2018). The trend is driven by both the increasing availability of behavioral



**Figure 1** Image from a Bud Light Ad featuring "Game of Thrones" Themes

data and concerns about the reliability of opinions and intentions, as reported in surveys. In this regard, conversation data are behavioral, whether collected by counting social-media mentions, or offline conversational mentions as captured with a day-after recall survey.

Unlike purchase data, however, conversations are not constrained by the purchase cycle. Advertising for cars can provoke an immediate conversational response, even if a purchase by the same consumer is a year away. Even better, the person who sees the advertisement can talk about it with another person who is currently in the market. That makes conversation uplift a universal behavioral metric that can apply to any category.

# **Super Bowl Case Study**

The Super Bowl may be the most widely measured advertising event, as many firms use "the big game" to test the capabilities of metrics. In 2019, the current authors observed uplift in both online and offline conversation volume for 23 Super Bowl advertisers. They compared data for the week of the Super Bowl to the prior month, and the online and offline conversation metrics to three publicly available metrics for the same advertisers:

- uplift in views on the advertiser's YouTube channel;
- uplift in Google searches (e.g., Google Trends) for advertiser brands;
- ratings of each brand's commercials on USA Today's annual Super Bowl Ad Meter.

Ideally, one would correlate these results to improvements in business outcomes, such as consumer purchases or retail visits. Because these generally are proprietary datasets, the authors compared the online and offline conversation data, and the three metrics above, seeking patterns that may indicate the value of each metric.

**Aggregate Results.** Before reporting the differences by brand, it is worth looking at how the brands fared, overall, against the four

**Table 1** How the Metrics Performed Following the 2019 Super Bowl for 23 Advertisers

	YouTube Views	Online WOM	Offline WOM	Google Search
Average increase	114%	79%	18%	15%
Number up 10%+	18	14	9	9

Note: The table summarizes average change for each metric after Super Bowl, compared to pre-game benchmarks. See Appendix 1 for the complete dataset. Sources: YouTube views and Google Trends pulled by Engagement Labs: online and offline conversation data from TotalSocial® by Engagement Labs.

metrics that involve uplift on a pre/post Super Bowl basis. (For most metrics, the first four weeks of January represented the "pre" wave, and the week beginning with the February 3 Super Bowl was the "post" wave, leaving out the fifth week of January from the analysis. In the case of YouTube views, however, the fifth week of January was counted as a "post" week because so many Super Bowl advertisers released commercials early on YouTube, driving up views just ahead of the game.)

Of the four metrics that involved a pre/post comparison, YouTube views moved the most dramatically (See Table 1). On average, the advertisers gained more than twice the views on their brand channels around the time of the broadcast versus the four prior weeks. This makes sense because YouTube often is used as the platform for prereleasing Super Bowl commercials, and consumers use it to replay and share commercials. Fully 18 of the 23 advertisers enjoyed an increase in YouTube views of 10 percent or more.

The second largest increase was online conversations, with an average rise of 79 percent, and 14 of 23 brands receiving a bump of 10 percent or more. Online conversation volume tends to be low absent a major campaign, so this is a metric that a Super Bowl can drive up dramatically versus the benchmark.

Offline conversations were more difficult to move than social media. The average brand got an 18 percent lift in offline conversations, including only nine brands that experienced a lift of 10 percent or more during the week of the Super Bowl versus the first four weeks of January. The current authors attribute this to variation in the quality of creative execution, and the fact that base levels for offline conversations are very large and thus difficult to move. Other researchers who have sought to correlate advertising expenditures to conversation levels have found modest relationships, which also may be due to variation in advertising creative and methodology (Lovett, Peres, and Xu, 2019).

Google search activity was surprisingly muted, and the pattern of movement was similar to what the current authors observed for offline WOM. The brands got an average increase of just 15 percent, and fewer than half had an increase of 10 percent or more.

**Table 2** Performance Rank for Super Bowl Advertisers On Five Metrics

	USA Today Ad Meter	YouTube Views	Online WOM	Offline WOM	Google Search
Amazon	2	3	13	14	16
Audi	8	11	17	23	13
Bud Light	16	5	1	4	1
Budweiser	7	22	2	8	2
Burger King	23	9	23	18	20
Colgate	19	6	12	10	6
Doritos	15	13	3	5	5
Google	8	20	16	17	12
Hulu	4	14	21	13	21
Hyundai	12	23	11	19	8
Kia Motors	6	12	10	3	3
Mercedes-Benz	10	19	15	21	11
Microsoft	3	7	18	20	18
Netflix	11	21	20	16	22
NFL	1	18	14	2	23
Norwegian Cruise	20	17	4	22	7
Olay	17	4	19	7	10
Pepsi	12	8	5	6	4
Sprint	21	2	8	15	19
T-Mobile	18	1	9	12	9
Toyota	14	16	22	9	15
TurboTax	22	10	6	1	14
Verizon Wireless	5	15	7	11	17

Note: Each number in the table indicates how the advertiser ranked for each metric, based on raw score (Ad Meter only) or percentage improvement in the "post" versus "pre" wave (all other metrics). The top six for each are highlighted.

Sources: USA Today Ad Meter; YouTube views and Google Trends pulled by Engagement Labs; online and offline conversation data from TotalSocial® by Engagement Labs.

**Individual Advertiser Results.** At the individual advertiser level, the authors assessed the degree of agreement across the metrics. Did all the metrics agree on which advertisers were winners and losers in the Super Bowl?

The research team ran Pearson correlations on the average percent increase for each metric (See Appendix 2) but found that large variations in percentage change overwhelmed some of the more subtle effects. To help normalize the data, the researchers ranked the brands based on their performance on the metrics and calculated correlations based on relative performance—that is, their rank on each metric among the 23 advertisers (See Table 2). Under each metric, a rank number was assigned to indicate how the brand performed among all brands. The brand with the average highest score

**Table 3** Rank Order Correlations between Each Pair of Metrics

	USA Today		Online	Offline	
	Ad Meter	YouTube	WOM	WOM	
YouTube	-47%				
Online WOM	-18%	9%			
Offline WOM	-1%	21%	39%		
Google Trends data	-20%	9%	67%	27%	

Sources: USA Today Ad Meter; YouTube views and Google Trends pulled by Engagement Labs; online and offline conversation data from TotalSocial® by Engagement Labs.

in Ad Meter, the NFL, for example, is ranked No. 1 for Ad Meter. The brand with the largest percentage rise in YouTube views, Bud Light, is ranked first on that metric, and so on.

This analysis revealed a surprising lack of agreement among the various metrics. No advertiser scored in the top six on all five metrics, and only one—Bud Light—scored well on four out of five, making it the strongest contender for "most effective" Super Bowl advertiser of 2019, despite being ranked in the bottom half on *USA Today*'s Ad Meter. Doritos, Kia, and Pepsi scored in the top six on three metrics.

The disagreements often were very large. Amazon Alexa's entertaining commercial—showing Harrison Ford's dog placing large e-commerce orders—ranked in the top three on Ad Meter and YouTube, but only middling on the other three metrics. TurboTax's creepy commercial demonstrating the value of a real human on the other end of the customer support line was No. 1 for offline WOM, No. 6 in social media, but second from last on Ad Meter.

To summarize the relationships among the metrics, the authors correlated each metric against every other metric to assess consistencies and differences (See Table 3).

Importantly, Ad Meter results did not correlate with any of the other metrics—indeed they usually were negatively correlated. This pattern strongly suggests that popularity of creative content unlikely will be relevant to effectiveness (Smit, van Meurs, and Neijens, 2006). This may be due to the Ad Meter data being self-reported opinions from all consumers—not just the target consumers—whereas the other four metrics are based on behavioral responses of people engaged by the advertisements. Ad Meter appears to have produced some false positives—high scores for Google, Hulu, and Microsoft that otherwise performed poorly—and false negatives for Bud Light, Doritos, Pepsi, and TurboTax that all performed poorly in Ad Meter yet seemed to do well on other metrics.

YouTube views also were largely uncorrelated to other metrics, despite the impressive increases that nearly all advertisers enjoyed. Olay and Sprint are examples of brands whose YouTube views more than tripled, but they didn't perform well on other metrics.

Online and offline conversation volume behaved differently. The two metrics were moderately correlated with each other, at 39 percent, and correlated with Google Search, especially the online conversations. Because a Google Search often is undertaken by consumers as part of the purchase process—indicating interest, desire to learn more, and possibly to find a retailer—it is probably the closest to the type of business outcome that advertisers are seeking. It was also a metric that Super Bowl advertisers had difficulty moving, as was observed with offline conversation volume.

In some cases, the conversation metrics provided the key evidence of potential success. Without conversation data, brand managers for Doritos, Pepsi, and TurboTax might have been rather disappointed with their Super Bowl performances.

#### **DISCUSSION**

The research described above adds evidence to earlier findings that conversations are valuable indicators of whether an advertisement will perform in delivering business results (Hogan *et al.*, 2004; Romaniuk and Hartnett, 2017). Brand conversations—face-to-face and online sharing—are behavioral responses to advertising that typically happen very soon after exposure, regardless of the purchase cycle. Purchases, in turn, are behavioral responses, but for infrequent purchase categories, the time lag between ad exposure and purchase is too long to be useful.

Measuring conversational uplift for brands can be an important indicator of whether an advertisement has hit the right target, delivered a relevant message, created brand identification, and sparked a response that leads someone to consider a purchase and share that reaction with others. When these outcomes are achieved, purchases likely will follow—by the initial target and by people in that social network. By contrast, commercials that earn favorable reviews from consumers, as with the Ad Meter system, fail to consistently perform better on behavioral metrics than unpopular commercials.

#### **Implications for Practice and Research**

Although conversation lift is a useful way to measure a form of behavioral brand engagement generated by advertising, a disadvantage is that important perceptual changes about a brand, or a purchase, may occur without stimulating a conversation. It is also true that measuring offline conversation is a potentially costly investment and may not be practical for small, localized campaigns.

Moreover, the Super Bowl is an imperfect laboratory for comparing advertising effectiveness metrics. The high advertising dollars spent, size of audience, coviewing in party-like atmospheres, and large investments in creative all contribute to making the Super Bowl a unique event and difficult to generalize to other conditions.

The correlation between online and offline conversational reaction, in fact, is higher for the Super Bowl than under more ordinary circumstances (Fay and Larkin, 2017).

Yet, there was strong WOM response to more routine advertising occasions, particularly when it was possible to compare uplifts in conversation for those exposed versus those not exposed to the advertisements. In 2018, a publicly released study for Turner Sports conducted during the middle of the NBA season found an average conversation uplift versus nonviewers of 75 percent for the in-home audience and 125 percent out-of-home (Crupi, 2018). The latter higher uplift appears related to the potential for immediate conversation, similar to the social dynamic of Super Bowl broadcasts environment, that exists out of home. Hence, advertisers have reason to expect effective advertising will drive conversations year-round.

The authors did not have available data to compare conversation uplift to several other types of advertising effectiveness measures, such as advertising recall, purchase consideration, or unconscious responses that can be measured through neuroscience techniques. Future research could include these types of additional metrics on the same set of advertisers and commercials, in order to assess the unique contributions of each in evaluating advertising success.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Appendix 1** Performance for Super Bowl Advertisers on Five Metrics

	Ad Meter	YouTube			Online Conver		
	Score	Weekly Views (Pre)	Weekly Views (Post)	Percentage Change	Mentions (Pre)	Mentions (Post)	Percentage Change
Amazon	7.34	104,808	38,105,596	362.57	477,425	531,150	0.11
Audi	6.38	716,797	5,497,912	6.67	30,737	30,750	0.00
Bud Light	5.56	6,591	733,462	110.28	7,858	72,700	8.25
Budweiser	6.41	4,328,516	857,545	-0.80	6,966	38,489	4.53
Burger King	3.63	31,251	345,996	10.07	53,083	29,586	-0.44
Colgate	5.04	13,718	881,275	63.24	1,380	1,560	0.13
Doritos	5.63	881,004	6,352,600	6.21	16,138	49,681	2.08
Google	6.38	15,812,440	13,637,821	-0.14	770,411	795,739	0.03
Hulu	7.05	982,224	6,955,005	6.08	50,497	40,085	-0.21
Hyundai	5.84	137,643	19,319	-0.86	45,355	51,935	0.15
Kia Motors	6.51	547,299	3,976,036	6.26	17,377	20,724	0.19
Mercedes-Benz	6.31	353	344	-0.03	22,088	22,983	0.04
Microsoft	7.07	589,321	15,108,594	24.64	175,238	175,276	0.00
Netflix	6.11	18,167,616	11,132,238	-0.39	553,739	479,369	-0.13
NFL	7.69	17,614,650	23,097,410	0.31	959,526	1,056,558	0.10
Norwegian Cruise	4.61	190,664	468,141	1.46	2,942	7,599	1.58
Olay	5.34	29,381	10,320,160	350.25	2,331	2,321	0.00
Pepsi	5.84	354,063	6,976,866	18.71	45,043	76,571	0.70
Sprint	4.45	21,483	9,772,590	453.90	14,536	18,309	0.26
T-Mobile	5.29	6,576	7,764,251	1179.65	60,665	74,244	0.22
Toyota	5.70	188,299	501,325	1.66	187,560	136,451	-0.27
TurboTax	4.22	1,642,955	16,531,835	9.06	15,058	23,518	0.56
Verizon Wireless	6.57	2,274,554	11,288,471	3.96	83,586	111,568	0.33

Note: 23 Super Bowl advertisers are shown before based on how they performed on five different metrics. *USA Today*'s Ad Meter is a single score based on consumer ratings of commercials on a scale of 1–10. All the others are a percentage increase or decrease on a pre/post broadcast basis, with some differences in how pre/post are defined.

YouTube: pre = first four weeks of January, post = fifth week of January; online data: pre = previous four weeks, post = week of Super Bowl; offline conversation data: pre = first four weeks of January, post = week of Super Bowl; Google trends data: pre = two weeks prior, post = two weeks after.

Sources: USA Today Ad Meter; YouTube views and Google Trends pulled by Engagement Labs; online and offline conversation data from TotalSocial® by Engagement Labs.

**Appendix 2** Pearson Correlations on Percent Change

	Ad Meter	YouTube	Online Data	Offline Data	
YouTube	-18%				
Online Data	-6%	-6%			
Offline Data	-11%	-12%	9%		
Google Trends Data	-15%	-1%	92%	1%	

Note: Correlations among the metrics based on Pearson correlations based on raw statistics for Super Bowl Advertisers in Table 3, where the *USA Today* Ad Meter is a single score and the other metrics are a percentage change between the pre and post waves. The high correlation between online and offline conversation is much greater than observed under ordinary circumstances.

Sources: USA Today Ad Meter; YouTube views and Google Trends pulled by Engagement Labs; online and offline conversation data from TotalSocial® by Engagement Labs.

	Offline Conversation Data			Google Trends Data		
	Mentions (Pre)	Memtions (Post)	Percentage Change	Score (Pre)	Score (Post)	Percentage Change
Amazon	173,735,884	154,512,270	-0.11	65	65	-0.01
Audi	13,273,740	6,771,717	-0.49	86	91	0.06
Bud Light	21,447,247	29,556,582	0.38	6	17	1.92
Budweiser	13,813,370	15,436,762	0.12	39	67	0.70
Burger King	47,607,349	41,006,322	-0.14	68	64	-0.05
Colgate	19,196,835	20,844,939	0.09	35	41	0.17
Doritos	9,647,774	13,104,530	0.36	66	81	0.23
Google	46,939,938	40,652,831	-0.13	83	89	0.07
Hulu	29,948,673	28,917,994	-0.03	70	63	-0.10
Hyundai	10,698,766	9,096,396	-0.15	80	88	0.10
Kia Motors	12,365,518	24,593,108	0.99	67	87	0.31
Mercedes-Benz	11,698,126	8,879,490	-0.24	83	89	0.07
Microsoft	23,082,339	18,859,770	-0.18	92	90	-0.03
Netflix	86,616,786	75,729,473	-0.13	68	55	-0.19
NFL	48,508,312	109,520,859	1.26	41	19	-0.52
Norwegian Cruise	3,489,374	2,627,216	-0.25	79	90	0.13
Olay	14,466,936	16,211,195	0.12	79	86	0.08
Pepsi	106,868,224	128,952,138	0.21	67	87	0.30
Sprint	36,482,253	32,052,567	-0.12	75	72	-0.04
T-Mobile	38,182,063	37,854,589	-0.01	61	67	0.10
Toyota	63,089,606	69,432,850	0.10	88	93	0.06
TurboTax	2,033,275	7,234,284	2.56	80	85	0.06
Verizon Wireless	104,942,054	108,942,871	0.04	62	61	-0.01