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Using Facebook and Google Digital Marketing Tools to Engage with Consumer Data

Ben Richards

Introduction

This lesson introduces students to two digital marketing tools from familiar giants in the online world, Facebook and Google, for the practical purpose of researching audiences and their interests as well as sparking discussion on the collection and use of big data in marketing. A different beast than traditional business information resources, today's big data platforms provide aggregated access to the raw data generated from our ubiquitous interaction with the digital world. These platforms provide unprecedented access to user data from social networks, search engines, e-commerce stores, and more, but they require a different approach than the typical library database. Facebook Business Suite Insights and Google Trends, in particular, offer a good introduction to the use of big user data as the interfaces are built for use by non-experts, and the data collection mechanisms should be easily understood by most students. Their use, while novel and information-rich, often prompts questions about the ethics of how the data is generated, collected, and the very nature of these practices in the first place.

Planning

Number of participants

Appropriate for classes of 10–25 students working alone or in groups.

Audience

Junior/senior-level marketing or advertising students, preferably with either a marketing research or social media strategy assignment.

Preparation and Resources

- Access Facebook Business Suite through <https://business.facebook.com>. (Instructor will need a Facebook account and a Facebook Page. Create Page here: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/creation/>.)
- Access Google Trends through <https://trends.google.com/trends/>
- Infographic on data collection and brokering by global companies.¹
- Instructional PowerPoint files on Facebook Business Suite insights and Google Trends have been shared by the author and can be optionally used (provided in the ACRL Sandbox (sandbox.acrl.org) and findable with the tag “#bizinfoit”).
- Provide copies of “Research Tools Worksheet” for students to complete during the session (provided in the ACRL Sandbox (sandbox.acrl.org) and findable with the tag “#bizinfoit”)—one worksheet per student for individual projects, one per group for group projects.

Description of Lesson/Activity

Goals/learning outcomes

1. Students will access aggregated user data using Google Trends and Shopping Insights and Facebook Business Suite insights.
 - This learning outcome focuses on the immediate benefit of learning about new tools and utilizing them to gather marketing insights from aggregated user data.
2. Students will consider the data collection methods and propose opportunities for how the data could be used.
 - This learning outcome focuses on having students analyze how the data collection process influences how the data can be interpreted and what insights can be generated from such a dataset.
3. Students will reflect on the ethical challenges presented by wide-scale generation and collection of user data.
 - This learning outcome focuses on students reflecting on the data collection process and what, if any, ethical considerations there are.

Time required

40–60 minutes

Teaching Outline

Quotes in bold below serve as discussion prompt suggestions for the instructor to share with the class. A worksheet for students to complete has been shared by the author.

1. Start the lesson by asking students if they have a Facebook or other social media account. Many will answer yes. Ask several to share how they use it with relation to brands, public brands, or video content: “Do any of you follow or engage with brand, company, or store pages? Other public profiles?”; “Do you view or engage with ads suggested videos?”; “Do you share posts from other pages?” The purpose of this discussion is to elicit responses that are examples of how user data is generated on social media platforms. Allow several students to respond, for 2–3 minutes of discussion.

Facebook Audience Insights

2. **“We know that Facebook’s business model is built around ad revenue. Did you know that anyone can get a glimpse of how advertisers and marketers use the platform and that much of the aggregate user data is available for free?”** Demonstrate the core features of the Audience Insights tool within Facebook Business Suite. If students have an audience/market they are researching, then use that audience as an example. Highlight the demographic data on the Facebook population and audience level as well as the Page Likes. Provide different examples of how to narrow the audience through the available filters (age, geography, and interests) and point out how the audience size and audience profile changes.
3. Explain that Facebook collects data from user interaction with the platform and that users essentially produce their own data through their own supplied information as well as page likes and other activity on their devices.
4. **“Knowing that user data is being collected by Facebook, how does this change your perception of the platform as a user?” “How does this change your perception of the platform from the perspective of a marketer? Based on what you know about how the data is collected, what kind of insights can you reasonably draw about your audience?”** Expect both some aversion to the idea of user data being collected and interest in the power of that user data as a marketing tool. Allow for 2–3 minutes of discussion.
5. Ask students to come up with a set of audience criteria that would successfully target or describe their current target market. **“What criteria did you use to target your audience? What insights can you pull from this platform?”** Allow 7 minutes of experimentation time, then 2–3 minutes for sharing.

Google Trends

6. Now ask students about how many times they use Google (or other Google services) a day. Most will probably say many. You can remind them that YouTube and Google Maps are counted here as well. From a marketing perspective, ask them to share what their Google search history might reveal about them as a consumer. Allow for 2–3 minutes of discussion.
7. Demonstrate the Google Trends platform; show how it displays search interest for different terms on an index over time. Point out how you can compare interest in different terms, and focus on specific locations.

8. *Optional* Demonstrate the Google AdWords platform briefly to show the “consumer” tool and “marketing equivalent” of Google Trends. Highlight in-market audience targeting and affinity marketing in addition to the demographic and keyword targeting.
9. Ask students to brainstorm how Google Trends can be used by a marketer. **“How could you use this tool to gain a better understanding of your market?”** Students might suggest that one could identify geographic regions where search interest is higher, compare interest to that of competitors, identify seasonal patterns, or pick out SEO/keyword marketing terms to use in marketing campaigns and for website optimization. Allow for 2–3 minutes of discussion.
10. Ask students to experiment with the Google Trends tool and report any useful insights for their product/service/market. Allow for 5 minutes of experimentation time and 2–3 minutes of sharing.

Wrap-up

11. Show Nick Routley’s infographic from Visual Capitalist² and explain that Facebook and Google are just two of many companies that harvest and aggregate user data to be used for marketing purposes. Discuss briefly how data from different platforms, transactions, and behaviors can be linked and essentially make up a digital profile for individuals that to different extents is available to marketers through various data brokers. For each of their product/service projects, ask students to brainstorm what other user/customer data would benefit their market research and marketing strategy, and hypothesize how that data might be accessible or who would provide access to it. Suggestions might include customer shopping, subscription, spending data, browsing history, financial and credit information, etc. Use a think-pair-share setup for this discussion, with 2 minutes of thinking, 3 minutes of small group discussion, and 2 minutes of class sharing.
12. *Optional* Ask students to reflect on how this kind of data collection could be harmful and, alternatively, how does it benefit society? How can companies responsibly collect and use customer data—or should they at all?

Transferability

Substitute databases

There should not be a need to substitute resources, as both Think with Google: Google Trends and Facebook Business Suite are free platforms. However, Google Adwords is an ad-buying platform that provides some user search insights as well as some demographic information and would be more likely to be used in an SEO/digital marketing context. The author finds it less intuitive to use (and it is not advertised as an “insights”-oriented tool). Both platforms are subject to change in functionality or availability without warning.

Ability to transfer online or in-person

This lesson could transfer to a synchronous online session easily. For use in an asynchronous context, demonstrations of the platforms could be prerecorded and prompts given to students. A web tool like Flipgrid (<https://info.flipgrid.com/>), LMS tool like Blackboard’s Voicethread (<https://voicethread.com/howto/blackboard-2/>), or other asynchronous

video discussion tool could be used to allow students to record their responses to the various prompts.

To different audiences

Because this session both introduces practical tools and requires students to consider the concept of big user data and the ethics behind its collection and use, it can serve a variety of different audiences and class sizes (with some tweaking and shifting of focus).

Digital identity workshops. For a standalone or otherwise integrated workshop on digital identity and privacy, this session could be adapted to focus on students' awareness of how their use of the internet, apps, and electronic devices can generate data and how that data may be used to track and market to them. Students could audit their social media and identify how marketing companies might use their data based on their online behavior.

Digital marketing classes. This session could focus more on how these tools are used in digital marketing. This might involve using Google Adwords instead of Google Trends and would focus less on insights but on audience targeting.

Ethics/law classes. This session could focus more on potential ethical or legal problems with collecting and using user data. Especially in lieu of changes to how user data is collected and how these practices are reported in the EU, as well as more public conversations about our social media environment's impact on society as a whole are had, this is sure to serve as impetus for discussion.

Market research methods classes. This session could focus on both the strengths and limitations of data captured through Facebook, Google, and similar platforms. Students could brainstorm how the data could and could not be reasonably used to make assumptions about a target audience or market.

Endnotes

1. Nick Routley, "The Multi-Billion Dollar Industry That Makes Its Living from Your Data," *Visual Capitalist*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/personal-data-ecosystem/>.
2. Ibid.

Bibliography

Routley, Nick. "The Multi-Billion Dollar Industry That Makes Its Living from Your Data." *Visual Capitalist*. April 14, 2018. <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/personal-data-ecosystem/>.