SHIFT/

INFORMED COMMUNICATIONS & PUBLIC RELATIONS

Using Data-Driven Insights to Conceptualize, Plan & Execute Campaigns

Communications strategy that is not driven by audience insights and informed by search data is unsustainable. It's missing critical buyer behavior and interest signals, and campaign content is unlikely to be discovered by the people who matter most.

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Insight-Driven Communications

When it comes to how our stakeholders seek, consume and share information, we live in a noisy and multilateral world. Today's path-to-purchase is non-linear.

With widespread content shock like we've never before seen — hundreds of thousands of news stories and an endless array of digital events and experiences flooding the media ecosystem each day — the narratives and campaigns we craft have little chance of rising above the din unless they are wildly compelling.

That's why we must approach our discipline as a craft, with equal parts art and science. An emotional bond between a brand and its stakeholders can't be engineered; that's the art. But the who, what, where, when and how behind any story can; that's the science.

There are three pillars we believe every integrated communications program, campaign and effort must be based on, without fail, to be effective today: informed by data, crafted with passion, distributed with precision.

When communications efforts are informed by data and insights, a company can build bespoke narratives, tell targeted dynamic stories and create engaging activations that excite audiences and connect on a personal level. It can find the most important media, influencers and channels through which to place and amplify them. It can ensure its content and stories are found — how people are searching for and consuming media.

In the following pages, we explore why every PR strategy and idea must begin with deep human insights. We share how to use data beyond simply highlighting performance, but rather as a strategic tool to optimize approach.

Read on for examples of data types and sources as well as real-world use cases for each of the four primary categories of insights we believe should be considered.

Gaining Deep Audience Insights

A great story, well told, can still fall flat if it doesn't find — or understand — its target. A well-informed integrated communications program should take into account:

- **Third-party audience research:** This is an obvious starting point, but not to be underrated. Datasets from bodies such as Data.gov, Nielson and Pew Research Center offer valuable guidance on what trends, issues and beliefs are shaping a target audience's behaviors.

- **Traditional buyer persona research:** Persona research uncovers concerns and challenges of target buyers, what influences their decisions and behavioral insights such as common personality traits. It should be informed by the previously mentioned sources as well as inputs such as job descriptions and analytics on current website visitors and social followers.

- **Current & prospective customers surveys:** When it comes to audience research, data and analytics show the "what" of behavior, but only surveying an audience can delve into the why. For example, analysis of social media posts from 2020 might show us that "stressed" was a common consumer sentiment, while surveying can uncover the root causes.

- **Conversation analysis & digital ethnography:** Insight into the conversations that are driving the issues that matter to a business' audience, the channels in which they're happening, the voices who are leading them and the language being used as they do is highly valuable. At a high level, it can be gathered via media monitoring and social analytics technologies along with simple tools such as "What's happening" on Twitter. Digital ethnography research — a field of study pioneered by our colleagues at NATIONAL Public Relations — takes this analysis further, mining thousands of conversations and large bodies of data through digital and social search tools to identify the beliefs, behaviors and decision processes audiences experience as they interact with brands and one another.

Depending on the scenario, a combination of both third-party and primary research may be needed to answer a question or paint a full picture of a company's audience. With the resulting findings on behavioral trends, values and preferences shaping decisions and topics that matter, a company can inform its brand position. It can map out where its brand (values, mission, offerings and purpose) overlaps with what its audiences care about — and then build programs that live in that sweet spot.

Audience Insights in Action: Launching an LED Disinfecting Technology

vital vio

When launching LED light disinfecting technology company Vital Vio, SHIFT set out to generate demand by creating conversations about the dangers of poor cleaning habits with a consumer survey campaign.

To ensure our survey would be drive interest and coverage in top business, consumer, technology and trade publications, we took an insight-driven approach. Using media analysis tool Sysomos, we conducted a yearlong search of all "health," "cleanliness," and "germ"-focused media coverage that was published in our key target URL domains. We found white spaces in relevant trending topics such as how consumer habits impact the spread of disease, how to disinfect without using harsh chemicals and the causes of the spread of germs on smartphones.

By uncovering topics the target audiences cared about, we were able to design survey questions with proven interest, which helped shape a successful campaign that garnered over 100 pieces of earned coverage and brokered relationships with key business prospects.

Drawing Out Salient Underpinnings Beneath Trends

When it comes to using audience data to craft PR and narrative strategy, it's about whittling down research and findings to pinpoint the needle in the haystack; the overarching campaign theme that will resonate.

That's why a company must set out to understand not only recent trends, but also what's driving those shifts.

- **Trend triangulation:** The real value in trend data lies in understanding what larger factors are playing a role. Questioning the why behind a trend and searching for more answers by triangulating data from multiple sources and on related topics is key to creating communications that are meaningful for a target audience.

Consider one example: online time on mobile devices and smartphones declined during the pandemic[1]. The likely reason? As a result of COVID-19, people began spending considerably more time at home, with easy access to computers. By digging deeper into a trend, directional insights can be uncovered. In this example, a company might focus on creating initiatives that enrich the new "at-home lifestyle" while also creating content better suited for large screens than mobile devices.

Trend Triangulation in Action: Helping Evite Lead a Cultural Conversation

evite

As a legacy pioneer in celebrating moments, our client Evite needed a contemporary narrative to remind consumers why it's so important to connect face-to–face. Together, we embarked on making the brand a leader in the conversation on loneliness in America. We triangulated two trends. The first was friendship. Through news analysis and first-person accounts, we uncovered that adults in the U.S. may have a hard time making friends. The second — a likely cause — was digital dependence. With American adults spending over three hours a day using the mobile internet — a number expected to grow to over four hours in 2021 — face-to-face interaction is threatened.

In linking these two trends, we helped Evite lead the conversation on prioritizing in-person interactions to build deeper connections. Through aggressive earned media resulting in 115,000 pieces of on-message national and broadcast coverage — along with digital events to gather friends in-person — we helped repositioned Evite as an authority and resource on how to cultivate relationships. In the month after the campaign, Evite.com saw a 15.45% increase in new users and 15.32% increase in pageviews on their website vs. the year prior.

Auditing Key Competitors

Any high-performing program should begin with a comprehensive audit of competitor activity to identify key opportunities and strategic gaps. This should be performed across the Paid, Earned, Shared and Owned spectrum of media and properties.

- **Paid media analysis:** Knowledge on the keywords, channels and messages competitors are investing in provides valuable insight for differentiating or catching up. Tools such as SpyFu provide a look into PPC keywords for competitors.

- **Earned media analysis:** Media monitoring tools such as Meltwater paired with search tools such as Moz reveal high-value linkbacks and on-message coverage on high-equity website domains or by influential reporters with large social followers.

- **Social media analysis:** Analysis of which networks and types of posts are receiving highest engagement for competitors is valuable in understanding where a company should prioritize its own resources.

- **Owned media analysis:** Insights into most-shared or organically visible content and which owned channels have the best engagement are helpful for prioritizing and can be found through tools such as SEMRush and Ahrefs.

By examining each of these critical marketing channels within the competitive set, companies can gain a bias-free perspective on the effectiveness and engagement level of the various strategies before shaping plans.

Competitor Auditing in Action: Growing Alteryx's Share of Voice

alteryx

Data analytics powerhouse Alteryx worked with SHIFT to grow awareness and its mindshare with data scientists, business analysts and key decision makers across the enterprise. That meant competing with larger businesses in tangential pockets of the overall big data space.

To gain an edge, we pursued quarterly analysis of direct competitors and (larger) thought leadership competitors. We analyzed who led in paid, earned, shared and owned marketing efforts – and the reasons why — to uncover gaps and opportunities.

We found that Tableau, who led the competitive set's Share of Voice, was getting a halo effect from its very large, very talkative online community. This led to the recommendation that Alteryx invest in a formal and consistent community engagement program, to help gain organic visibility and buzz beyond the strong earned media program we were already executing, which helped Alteryx grow its share of voice and overtake Tableau — particularly during Alteryx's annual customer event.

Optimizing for Search Trends

Consider that a staggering 90% of content published online receives zero organic search traffic[2]. This means that nearly all the great content communications, PR and marketing professionals develop and articles they secure will never be discovered by target audiences.

With over 5 billion searches daily[3] — and 81% of shoppers conducting online research before making a major purchase[4] — search data is one of the best inputs for optimizing PR and integrated communications efforts.

- **Google Trends research:** Google provides high-level data on what's trending in search and its history. A term's interest over time helps indicate whether it is worth building content and messaging around, or what time of year people are most interested. Google also reveals in what geo (s) terms are most popular, along with related topics and queries that can serve as keyword synonyms or new content themes to attract a target audience.

- **Keyword research:** Uncovering and effectively using query-relevant keywords ensures owned and earned content is both discoverable and aligned with search intent. Building around those phrases

positions content to rank prominently for key industry terms and long-tail topic clusters with meaningful, qualified traffic. Worth nothing is that 65% of 25-49-year-olds speak to voice-enabled devices at least once a day[5], making it critical to optimize strategies for growing audio search behavior through long tail aural queries.

- **Gap analysis:** Understanding where competitors rank and generate organic traffic helps to identify qualified white spaces to attack in a company's own content strategy. Like general keyword research, this can be done through Search Engine Results Pages (SERP) analysis and with the help of tools such as Ahrefs.

- **Backlink research:** Similar to a gap analysis, understanding where competitors are acquiring backlinks can help shape an effective go-forward strategy. Are there specific publications to target? What campaigns and themes have yielded the best results? Acquiring high quality backlinks from authoritative websites is a critical ranking signal so it's important to have a solid grasp of the landscape before setting strategy.

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Using search as a key insight pillar helps increase visibility and lifespan of all earned, contributed and owned content by ensuring it ranks in search engines and is seen by more people longer. It also helps identify new campaign concepts based on real-time trend data. Without it, strategy is unsustainable, as it's missing critical audience behavior and interest signals.

Search Insights in Action: Optimizing GoDaddy's Content Marketing

GoDaddy

To turn its international content hub, "The Garage," into a leading online source for SMBs, we helped GoDaddy revamp its content strategy through search insights. We identified topic opportunities through keyword research and by forecasting search trends. We then sourced and managed expert authors to develop content, ultimately amplifying it to their existing SMB audiences.

Focusing on high-traffic keywords with white space and utilizing keyword clusters and queries densely throughout posts, content was more discoverable for target audiences and had lasting power in search engine results. This approach drove staggering organic traffic growth for three consecutive years, including a 263% lift in blog traffic.

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Combining Insights for Winning Campaigns

PR and communications programs today must be driven by insights. Every creative brief and idea must be built around a deep understanding of an organization's audience(s).

Through a combination of internal and third-party data, along with primary research as needed, organizations can unearth the conversations driving the issues that matter to them and their audiences, the channels in which they're happening, the voices who are leading them and the language being used as they do.

From trending topics and behaviors to sharing patterns on social media and online search behavior, these audience insights are readily available with the help of modern marketing and communications technologies and analytics — and they must be used as the starting point for compelling and relevant communications strategies.

Taking an insight-driven — and a search-centric — approach to PR and communications will outperform a non-insights and non-SEO-led strategy every time. Especially when it's used as the basis to craft narratives, messages and content with passion and distribute them with precision.

Ready to break through?

We'd love to hear from you at **shiftcomm.com/contact** or **contact@shiftcomm.com**

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About SHIFT Communications

SHIFT is an integrated communications firm that operates at the nexus of art and science to help brands break through and thrive. We leverage data and analytics to engineer the who, what, when, where and how behind programs. We harness deep human insights, empathy and expertise to craft compelling narratives and campaigns that connect on a personal level, and then use advanced targeting to get them in front of the people who matter most. Established in 2003, SHIFT is an AVENIR GLOBAL company representing global brands and emerging category disruptors in the technology, b2b, healthcare and consumer sectors. Learn more at **shiftcomm.com**

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