SM I have a few introductory questions to start with and I would like to ask first, what is your role within the company?

IR My official title is Social Media Manager for Non-profit 2. My role is to develop social media strategy globally so that we can engage with our customer base, recruit potential new customers, and exploit opportunities, I guess, in the sort of social arena in terms of pushing our brand and recruiting students, supporting our members, a whole myriad of objectives really. So yes, my role is to develop strategy, look at developing tactical social media plans, implementing them, and then monitoring our performance and looking at the insights.

SM And how did you come to be involved in commissioning social media insights?

IR I guess I kind of led on it; we appointed a social media agency and kind of learnt from them that doing a lot of looking at the sort of data would be helpful in terms of determining our activity going forward. It was a kind of a commensensical approach I suppose.

SM And can you tell me a little bit about where the company is involved and what it does?

IR Yes, Non-profit 2 is [a] professional global accountancy body, so if you want to become a practicing accountant or an accountant in business, you take our qualifications over a number of years. You then prove your practical experience in the role as an accountant, and then you get to use Non-profit 2 letters after your name, so it’s a professional membership body similar to ones that doctors or lawyers or other professional people might have.

SM That sets it very nicely. And I have a series questions about the social media insights. So why did your company to use social media insight?

IR Again, I spoke to social media experts, agencies, and a long time ago now, about four years ago, and they were of the opinion that you needed to listen to your audience and monitor your audience and monitor their activity, so what we would term as listening, before we actually got involved in doing any social media activity ourselves, so that’s kind of where it started. So we looked at where our audiences were, what they were talking about, across forums, across major social networks, and did an audit of that. And then that just sort of carried on really, because it just informs, and if you don’t look at what your audience are doing or then how you’re engaging with your audience on the social channels, there’s no way of knowing that you’re getting it right or that you’re engaging with them in a productive way, so that would always mean that we would have to look at insights.

SM So what were the aims then in doing so?

IR Initially, to see what platforms our audiences were using, so we did a broad listening audit across any social platform that we could find, see which ones were the popular platforms, and see what mentions our company got, and that defined, if you like, what our strategy was then going to be, so which platforms we chose to be on, which users we wanted to engage with and what sort of topics we would talk to them about. So that’s why we got involved in insights. We developed then a strategy, and then the insights and the analytics continued, just as a way of enhancing the communities. It’s a bit like customer relationship management, there’s no point keep talking to a customer if you’re not talking to them about the right things, so you have to look at who they are and what they’re interested in.

SM And what exactly did the social media insights company do in terms of what did they monitor, when, for how long, across what sites?

IR Over the last four years we’ve appointed two agencies. The first one was LBI, which are a big digital solutions agency, Lost Boys International. They used Radian6 and Neilsen software to conduct a listening programme. And how long did we run it for? I think we conducted the listening for two months and again that was more Buzz monitoring type stuff, just to give us a platform or a framework to work on, and then we did more scheduled Buzz monitoring with Tempero. Is that what you wanted to know, what software they used?

SM Yeah, and also what they did with that kind of software?

IR With Tempero we did annual insights measurement using Radian6, and actually in-page analysis in 2012 and 2013. So I think in 2012 we did it per quarter, so we did Buzz monitoring per quarter. So they used Radian6 for that, and then in 2013 we just did a one-off thing that covered a couple of months. Sorry, I’m getting confused. And then we did some different kind of insight specific stuff on our own platforms. Does that make sense?

SM Yeah, it makes sense.

IR So the Buzz monitoring in 2012 was just looking at our users and trying to find what they were talking about. Again, working on what LBI had done, so that we could build pictures of our users and demographics and profile. Again, we did it in 2013, but not in such great detail, and then two different pieces of work were looking at our own platforms and by 2013 we had 20+ Facebook pages, we had a number of Twitter feeds, we had Linked In groups, and it was an audit of our own communities rather than auditing mentions of Non-profit 2 in forums or wherever.

SM So that kind of answers the next question I’m going to ask about the platform, so I guess it’s the standard ones such as Twitter, Facebook, for the initial kind of exercise you did to find out who is talking about you and so on, and then did something more specific on users, if I understand correctly.

IR Yeah, kind of, the earlier Buzz monitoring, I mean I don’t know the details about it, but they went into forums and things like that, they just used software that picked up mentions. The later auditing were the major platforms, what I class as Non-profit 2 owned platforms, so we created our global Facebook page, we built the community, and the agency sort of audited the insights from that. We could have done it ourselves in-house, but we chose not to, whereas the listening, that was adopting Radien6 and Nielsen software that kind of went beyond the major networking platforms. I’ve got documentation that lists all the platforms, I mean there are like hundreds that the initial listening exercise went into, and I’ve also got our own platforms for just Facebook, Twitter and Linked In, so we don’t engage communities on any other platforms, that’s part of our strategy.

SM So these two interlinked exercises, let’s say, you asked those to be carried by the first company you mentioned and Tempero explicitly to do so, or it was something you decided together?

IR Yes, absolutely. Together in terms of, what do you mean? Well, I initially asked LBI to do listening, and then that relationship with the agency we didn’t carry on and we appointed Tempero, and I suppose they persuaded me of the benefits of conducting the exercise, yeah.

SM And can you give me some examples of concrete findings or insights that you obtained through this kind of listening exercise and the mapping out of your own pages?

IR Gosh!

SM That was something I wanted to ask you, if you perhaps have some kind of documentation that could illustrate those findings that you obtained through a social media insights company, such as Tempero, that would be really helpful. Maybe you could email me a web page or a report or anything.

IR Yes, I can do. The listening that we did with LBI, they’re big documents, well, not big compared to university research, but big for corporates.

SM Because what we’re interested in are examples of findings you found interesting.

IR Yes, I can certainly email you the reports, or I can print them off now and we could go through them. The first one, I can remember that generally, and I mean this is a huge generalisation, but generally the Buzz monitoring told us that most of the social chatter to do with our brand was about jobs and it gave geographical information as well as to where the concentration of that chatter was going on, which again we know is what we term MENASA, so Middle East, Africa, South Asia regions, and nothing in the US, which is where our brand isn’t particularly strong, so there weren’t any surprises. It kind of reflected a lot of the market research that we do as a company anyway about ourselves and our brand, so there was lots of talk about jobs and how Non-profit 2 qualification enables you to improve your career prospects, geographical concentration where this chatter was going on. Those were probably the top line pieces of actionable information, but the reports themselves do detail more than that.

SM If you could send them by email, if that’s not a problem?

IR Yeah.

SM It would be strictly confidential and only me and the principle investigator will look at them.

IR That’s fine. I mean of all the reports, the reason that we did them, there are lists of recommendations of what we should do to capitalise or exploit on what data was discovered. A lot of it was reaffirming what we already knew, but it’s nice to have it there in black and white.

SM And the second exercise with Tempero, did that yield some kind of insights that were not present through the earlier Buzz monitoring that you did?

IR I think so. Gosh, it’s a long time ago now and I’m trying to remember. Did it give any further insights? It did, because I know that they were all useful reports.

SM In terms of some concrete information, or maybe that you acted upon even?

IR ((hesitates))

SM It doesn’t matter. If something comes back to you in the interview, just interrupt me and let me know and that will be really helpful. When you commissioned the insights from these two companies, what did you think you would use them for or do with them originally?

IR Originally, it was to assess whether there was any appetite in the market for entering the social arena, for investing in resource in order to create a social presence for the brand. We had no social presence, and this was like three or four years ago, and that’s what we wanted to assess, and we quickly realised that there was massive opportunity and that, interestingly, the birth of our Facebook page was started by one of our students and he gave it to us with the 50,000 followers already. And that is one thing that we have understood in the social space, because we’re a sort of educational qualification, we’re not like a consumer brand or a product, so we are genuinely useful, so in the social space people are happy to engage with this because they see some sort of ultimate benefit in terms of doing that, whereas they’re not that keen on engaging with Kit-Kat or Mars or whatever, because it’s just an off-the-shelf product, whereas ours is potentially a life-changing or career-changing product, but that’s digressing around the value that we get from social, but that did come across in the insights that Tempero were gathering for us. Did that answer that question?

SM Yes, that’s very helpful. Then in terms of actual uses I have a series of questions, so what have you used these insights for? I have a series of probing questions as well.

IR Initially, internal buy-in to the Board. We have a number of internal stakeholders that were perhaps initially cynical about social media and getting involved in social media and they were concerned about the resource required, so we used the insight reports to educate them, I suppose, about what the potential payback was going to be if we invested more in social media. Actually, that was probably one of the main findings from the insights, was that our users weren’t happy with the existing level of social presence and they wanted to have CRM, they wanted Customer Service through social channels, and as a result, we have implemented a social CRM tool, and insights, the reports from Tempero were pivotal in making that recommendation. What else? Loads, but I’m trying to quantify them in umbrella type. They were critical for us as a social media team to review, but I’m struggling to, apart from internal buy-in, CRM solution, and that was probably about it I suppose.

SM For example, so you said that partly they were a good insight to have to convince superior management that this is a genuinely useful thing to be doing as an organisation, so apart from the higher echelons of Non-profit 2, let’s say, who did you go to?

IR Oh gosh, well, we did global surgeries, so we did online presentations to offices, teams, departments, everybody that had an interest, basically everybody in the business, but buy-in from the top down, so educating and senior buy-in.

SM It kind of tricked down.

IR Yeah, we have a set internal coms process, we have an internal social intranet, so presentations went up there, we had calls, we had meetings, produced reports internally, that kind of thing.

SM And then I imagine they got passed on elsewhere, depending on how relevant or useful they were.

IR Yes, I often used them when appointing other suppliers and agencies. So, say, for example, I got an agency in about six months ago to develop a Facebook app, and the insights obviously is already there, they don’t have to go out and do it, so they already can swat up on, ‘Oh right, this is where they’re positioned, this is where their user base is,’ so we used it for external suppliers, if they were coming in to do projects or work.

SM And can you tell me of any decisions that were made on the basis of those insights? Obviously, as you said, one big one has been to get involved in social media.

IR Well, implementing the social CRM tool. We have a call centre and so their working practices have changed as a result, so they are all now trained up, and it’s ((Com Social 0:22:24?)) is the tool, it’s a web application that you embed in Facebook and it allows customer service agents to reply to users in real time and track that in itself, the tool in itself provides it, so analytics and insights into how quickly our agents are responding to people on Facebook and it tracks conversational history. So it basically makes in-page activity easier by using this little plug-in, but you can use it on Twitter as well, but we haven’t quite yet encouraged our customer service agents into the Twitter realm, but that’s my next step. So social CRM, and what was the question again?

SM If any decisions were made on the base of those insights?

IR More resource in social media, in terms of head account. We recruited new roles, new people into the organisation. Our strategy for social media, we’ve got 35 offices around the world, so they were encouraged, I guess, to get involved in social media activity and we could prove that there was appetite within their markets to do so and that they would engage communities based on those insights. We developed a set of KPIs for the Board to measure the social media team on, so as part of my own personal objectives I had social media KPIs put in to them.

SM Can you illuminate me over the KPI?

IR What they were?

SM Yeah.

IR They were pretty basic, they were around growth, but this year they’ve changed to growth and engagement, so, for example, for Facebook it was ‘likes’, and not rocket science, whereas this year it will be ‘likes’ and reach. So standard kind of in-platform KPIs, but from having had nothing to now having a measure, it’s quite significant.

SM I want to ask another question now. So from what I understand, you did the initial exercise of Buzz and listening, and then the second one on your own platform.

IR And then I did another thing actually that I’d forgotten, we did a dashboard that Tempero did. Do you want to talk about that?

SM Yeah.

IR I can even send you all that, because we did it for a year, and it was basically to try and build a model of metrics for our social media activity. So we’ve kind of gone on this journal: we’ve done listening, is there appetite out there? Oh, yes there is, let’s get on it. So we’ve got on it and we did it. Then Tempero helped us assess our own platform activity: was it good, what was the quality like, what we were getting out of it, so that was the second stage in the journey. And then the third stage was once we had all this huge growth, exponential growth and all the offices were doing it round the world, there was lots of this activity, but what did actually that mean? So Tempero developed dashboards for our own platforms again, we weren’t interested in competitors or Buzz monitoring, to see what impact our activity was having, and it was, for example, bringing it right down to if we did one Facebook post a day, how long did that take, what sort of reaction did we get, and therefore how much return on investment could we arguably say that got? So that’s not looking at users, I know, it’s looking at our activity, so that might be a red herring in terms of insights, but they used Simply Measured as the software tool to develop this dashboard and we basically tracked for a whole year how effective our activity was. So we compared Facebook to Twitter to blogs to Linked In to You Tube, so our strategic platforms and how they yielded, I suppose, if you like.

SM That’s very interesting, and at the moment with Tempero what are the things on which you are working? Is this dashboard exercise still ongoing at the moment?

IR No, it’s finished now – it was really expensive! Great, but a bit of a luxury I think, and again, that helped me recruit; I’ve got an insight specialist now in-house, so arguably we don’t really need that level anymore, so we do it in-house, and you’re close to it as well, in-house, rather than getting an agency to do it, because the platforms are in the forums or whatever. So Tempero don’t do any insights monitoring for us at the moment, but that’s their fault because they told us three years ago that we should bring it all in-house!

SM So I guess there has been a wide range of actions taken on the base of the insights you gathered over the last four years using social media insights?

IR Yeah, social media insights has driven our entire strategy, because we always bought into the idea of looking at insights first, and then whatever actions were made based on the data, yeah. So at the pains of repeating myself, but looking at recruitment levels, investment levels, customer service, internal communications, they were all as a result of the insights data that we’ve had. I mean we do go into further detail now, now that the rest of the company has come on a journey, we get lots of questions about the quality of the insight, or the quality of our users, who are they really, what do they really want? There’s more detail required, which I’m not necessarily convinced social can actually deliver, it’s about quantity, I think, because you don’t know who your users are, necessarily, but without meaning to dot around, the reason that we developed the Facebook app was because we actually wanted to elicit – and that sounds awful – people’s contact details, so that we could know who they were and then have a one-to-one conversation with them, because socially you’re just having a conversation with this amorphous group of people that you don’t necessarily know their preferences. You know something about their profile, but not enough to have a one-to-one conversation, so increasingly we’re being asked to drill down further into the data and sometimes it’s possible and sometimes it isn’t, but Facebook are changing their – what is it called? It’s a fairly new functionality. I’ve forgotten what it’s called now, it’s something to do with the URL, what’s it called? Do you know what I mean?

SM I’m not certain.

IR It’s within the Power Editor function of the platform, so previously we have run Facebook advertising and matched it – we provide magazines – and you can upload a file of people’s email addresses, and when they go into Facebook, ordinarily, they will then see our ad, so that’s one form of targeted advertising on Facebook. And there’s another one that uses web URLs rather than email addresses, but I can’t remember what it’s called, it’s a fairly new function. And that’s where I was interested in the more data mining type questions, is now there’s a sense of we’ve got 450,000 followers on Facebook of our Facebook page, and what do we really know about those individuals and can we unearth more understanding about them so that we can serve them more tailored, better material, in order that they might then take our qualification.

SM That makes perfect sense. I have a series of questions to that practice and we’ll get to that. But what I wanted to ask, to come back to the actual users of the social media insights, from the likes of it, you said through the dashboard and actions that you have taken have been tracked in that way, I imagine, to see what results they amounted to, if any, or that sort of thing.

IR Yes, I don’t know whether I’ve quite understood what you mean. I mean we have monthly web calls with what we call social media admin, so that any engagement managers around the world – because we’re Headquarters, by the way – they will come on a call and we’ll have a look at their performance on the social platforms and their activity and discuss ways with them ways of improving that activity, and that’s a formal process that we’ve introduced and our markets and offices are expected to provide reasons if activity is good or activity is bad. So we have monthly webinars with people to talk about the insights. We share it just with other internal teams really, so we have web teams, we have email communications, we have PR, we have publishing, so all those teams within Non-profit 2 have an interest in understanding more about our user base on social platforms. I don’t know what they then might do with it, but it’s more around the educational I suppose. I don’t know what they would do with it. What would you do if you were in publishing? It’s all about just moving content around for Non-profit 2 and making sure that it’s put in front of the best people. I don’t know whether I’ve really answered your question!

SM Yes, so the actions that have been taken from the social media insight, in terms of results, have these been good, do you think it has delivered?

IR I would say so. I think it’s mainly because most of the organisation is either frightened or afraid of social media, or certain individuals are, they don’t really know what it is, and when they’re told that we’ve put a bit of content out and 9 million people saw it and half of that engaged with it, that’s exciting for anybody. So yeah, we get a good reaction to that. So absolutely a positive reaction and people do want to know, but I don’t know what then they do about it.

SM But you would qualify the insights you have obtained from social media monitoring as generally useful then?

IR Yes, totally. I mean our focus probably as a team has completely shifted from content planning, which was the original focus when we started being active on social platforms, and it’s completely shifted to just looking at insights and how people react and understanding users, so yes.

SM Do you think that social media insights are beneficial then, and if so, who are you thinking of: for the company, for the clients, for other people as well? I mean it’s an interesting question, especially for a company like yours, because as you say, you sit on the boundary between an educational and a professional body.

IR Yes, insights are pivotal and I can’t believe that you wouldn’t get involved in social media without looking at your insights. You’re kind of cutting off your nose to spite your face! Can you say that question again?

SM Do you think that social media insights are beneficial, and if so, to whom?

IR Yes, they’re beneficial. They’re beneficial to the company, absolutely, to make sure that we’re pushing out the right messages and that our brand is perceived in the right way and that we’re encouraging students along their journey to membership. And beneficial to students, of course, because if they’re coming on our communities and engaging with us and we’re talking a load of rubbish, then they won’t want to know and they’ll vote with their feet, as it were, i.e., we’ll get to learn that through insights. So if insights are showing a positive trend around engagement and user interaction, then that helps us help them, as it were, so it is important to them. Commercially, I think probably insights is going to have an impact and we have various partners, commercial partners, and insights could probably make quite a robust business case to suggest that people might like to invest in Non-profit 2 because of the user base that we have in social media.

SM And what are the mechanisms of gaining customer, client or generally public feedback that you have you previously used, apart from social media insights?

IR Oh gosh, we have a whole market research team, so we do customer satisfaction surveys, we do online focus groups, physical focus groups, all sorts of surveys, anecdotal face-to-face. As a membership body, we do get to meet our members, so they could arguably tell us what they think of us and give us feedback in terms of how we’re performing as a body. And then press, obviously that’s another channel for assessing how we’re perceived, and also the accountancy industry.

SM Because I want to ask now, how do you think social media insights compare to other ways of gaining feedback?

IR Well, some days I look at insights and think, oh my God, I can’t believe I know that about people and how willing people are to, digital natives don’t care about what they share anymore and what comments they make or how transparent they are as a digital persona by getting engaged in all this sort of social community, and I think that there’s a wealth of data to be had. And then other times I’m more cynical about the data and what level of information it really does give us a business, which probably isn’t a very helpful answer really, I’m being dichotomous!

SM No, it’s a very good answer actually. Could you give me an example of what you have in mind when you say you are more cynical towards what can be gained through social media insights?

IR I suppose with the tools that we have and the activity that we do, we can’t- If I can give you an example. Within our Facebook community, sometimes we wonder about the quality – I think I’m okay in saying this – the quality of our users. Our qualification is really hard to pass, it’s a professional qualification, you have to be equipped in terms of existing qualifications, study, perhaps going to tuition, all that kind of stuff, and a lot of students that sign up for our qualification, particularly in developing economies, don’t have that type of support, be it financial, motivational, educational, and aren’t probably going to succeed in passing our qualification, and therefore, talking on social platforms to an enormously broad audience, is that a) wasting our time, and b) wasting their time because they’re never going to pass? So I’m cynical because social insights can’t segment that, can’t tailor that channel. It’s what I’ve said before, it’s about the quantity rather than the quality, so that’s what makes me cynical, that I can’t- Traditional marketing would say you need to target your audience, segment your messages, provide tailored content to the people that really need it, and vice versa. We’re encouraging, with all these apps that we develop, young people to come and talk to Non-profit 2 with the potential that they might get more money and get a better job, and that is also perhaps an unfair proportion to some people. So that’s my cynical side, because I don’t think it’s as targeted as an approach in terms of marketing, but then you think about verality and social engagement, and whilst you can’t always measure that as acutely as you would like to, that has enormous power potential. You’ve got your atypical social media examples or global phenomenon, like the man who American Airlines broke his guitar, or cookies taking advantage of the power failure in the Super Bowl, and all those social examples, flash mobs and all these trends, the Harlem Shuffle, and all that kind of stuff, they’re only borne out through social and that impact is, well, you can’t be cynical about how much reach those activities have, so that’s how I view it.

SM Do you think there are ways in which social media insights are superior to other types of ways you get feedback?

IR Do I think they’re superior?

SM Or better.

IR I don’t know anymore because everything is digital. I just think they’re different, they’ve got a different type of flavour to them.

SM Because of their immediacy perhaps?

IR Yes, that’s true, but there are digital insights that are also immediate. Are they better? I don’t know, I suppose I’d give the same answer as I did before, in some ways I’m cynical and in some ways I can realise the power.

SM So that also answers my next question, which was whether you think they are inferior in some ways?

IR No, I don‘t think so. I think my worry is that, I don’t know, maybe I’m wrong, but I think probably a couple of years ago insights, as they were, were like jaw-dropping and you’d be like, ‘Oh my God, I can get that from social platforms! Wow, what a lot of data!’ And then now, as those platforms themselves become far more commercial and everyone’s cottoned on to the idea of what Facebook’s all about and everything’s become generally a bit more cynical, and so users have become more guarded about their data and that’s manifested itself in some of the insights being a bit null and void, but that’s a sweeping generalisation about users, some users don‘t care and they’ve still got their profiles open and they’re happy to submit their data to you, and others aren’t. Inferior? Not yet!

SM Before I get to the other set questions, I wanted to come back to the issue you raised about the data mining aspect of it, and especially the distinction you talked about in quantitative and qualitative and the advantage of being more on the quantitative side. Could you comment a little bit on that, why do you think that is so?

IR Well, certainly on some of the Buzz monitoring that we’ve done you can’t dig into people’s profiles on certain platforms of security settings, privacy settings, and the ethical stance is fair enough, but the commercial stance is, that would be quite annoying, because then we could target them better with our marketing messages if we just could unearth a little bit more about these users. That would be my answer. Have I answered that fully?

SM Yes, I think so. And do you think the focus at the moment, within the social media insights work you are doing in-house, for example, is more on having a quantitative grasp of what is being said out there at an aggregate level, or it’s more a focus on drilling down to the individual level, or both perhaps?

IR Again, I can show you what our reports look like.

SM That would be very useful, yes.

IR Well, we’ll probably try and do it all really. Our insights, we look at insights to benchmark whether our content is being consumed positively, so there’s a measure on whether we’re having an impact, whether we’re getting through, whether we’re talking to the right audience, whether they’re engaging with us, so that’s one measure that insights can help us with. We’re also trying to understand, I guess ultimately we’re still always trying to understand more about our users, but we look at referral traffic, so what social platforms are referring most traffic to our website, because again, to try and build a picture of who these users are. What else do we do with our insights? We measure to the degree of which our content is consumed, because we’re interested with that, and where. So, for example, we’ve found that a lot of our user base is in South Asia, but actually that’s because they’re very active users, they’re not frightened, they’re shy of coming out and commenting, whereas actually in the UK we have what I class as more passive users. They engage with the content, and we only know that because we put URL shorteners and we track whether they’ve clicked on various links, but they won’t ‘like’ or comment or share or anything like that, so they’re secret users, as it were. I’ve forgotten what I was saying.

SM I initially asked about drilling down to the individual level to having a more active picture.

IR So again, just building more of a profile of our users. Ultimately, we are trying to go down to more individual, using the insights and what indications that they might offer us, but it’s still quantitative, we’re still looking at 18% of clicks came from the UK versus 10% came from Pakistan, so the assumption there is that they are enjoying our content in the UK. There are lots of caveats and assumptions, but I suppose that’s the same with any kind of data to a degree. I suppose from a membership point of view, this is one thing I would say, is that in terms of students that have applied and are going through the qualification, and members, we have a lot of their data, because we have to, so we know their age, their date of birth, their email address, where they are, what job they work in, so I guess we’re driven by the fact that internally we hold that huge amount of data and that they’re out there on social platforms and we can’t match them. I suppose that is probably the frustration at Non-profit 2, whereas if you’re a consumer brand, like Kit-Kat, you’re not going to know that [so-and-so] buys a Kit-Kat on Monday, because you just don’t know who I am, I’m a faceless consumer, but you’re not that bothered, all you want is me to keep doing it, so you’re prepared to have the qualitative actions in social. That’s what I sense, I sense the business is interested in matching the data that we hold internally with these users in social, and then also recruiting more through social channels, but again, to ultimately match.

SM Have a more complete demographic picture?

IR Yes.

SM What would be the greatest added value of having that kind of picture, what would be the benefit?

IR To service them once they’re registered, to understand more about customer journeys, so if the average student registers, it takes seven years to pass, then that affects the way that we sell or promote our brands or sell the qualification. So it’s about informing the customer journey so that we can then market and sell the qualification more appropriately.

SM That clarifies that question. I now have a series of questions about possible barriers to using social media insights within the organisation. So is there anything that you’d hoped to do with the social media insights but you didn’t?

IR Yes, I wanted to put some financial metrics around our social media activity, because it just makes sense. I’m investing this much in this sort of marketing activity, what sort of level of sign up am I getting? But it’s a bit like running poster advertising campaigns, you don’t know who’s seen your advert and you can’t track them in terms of when they come to apply to register for the qualification, so it’s been an eternal quandary for marketeers.

SM What does a click mean and all that?

IR Yes, and I did try to develop a set of financial metrics, for various reasons, for example ,when somebody applies online to take our qualification they fall into an Oracle database and getting the analytics from Oracle is almost impossible. So once they’ve fallen into that funnel they’re kind of gone, so you then can’t track how long they took to apply, to how long they took to qualify, how much they paid, de-de-de, you can only know that they applied, and that’s where the journey ends. So monetising a model in social just to apply didn’t make any sense. So then we tried to look at social advertising and develop a model around that, which is fine, but what does it show? It just shows whether people have engaged with your advertising on social media. It still doesn’t deliver a true value of the activity that you’re holding.

SM And have you encountered any difficulties in using the insights within the company? So that might be colleagues’ attitudes towards the value of social media, the structure of the company maybe impedes the user? Maybe sometimes it’s difficult to make sense of the insights themselves.

IR Probably, I think because only from our perspective as a company, we’re probably just a bit disjointed digitally, so therefore some social insights are irrelevant to some people, they don’t see the benefit of them. If I can’t tell them, for example, we did a post on Facebook and 2 million people engaged with it and somebody from another department will say, ‘How many of that 2 million were potential students and how many were registered students that are already going through the qualification?’ If I can’t tell them that they’re not interested, because they’ll be interested in one or other of those audiences and there’s no depth to that insight, apart from the fact that it’s 2 million. So from a content perspective that’s great, I know that it was appreciated by somebody, but I don’t know who they are necessarily. So that insight for some departments internally is not sufficient, they want more.

SM And have you ever found that it’s difficult to make sense of what the insight might signify?

IR Yes! Yes, always, but that’s the very nature of social, it’s that verality and the reach and the fact that algorithms are changing all the time so you don’t know where your content is being served to, so your benchmarks in terms of how many people you’re reaching or how many people have seen your content, yes, very frustrating, yes!

SM And has it happened that the insights might be interesting but difficult to use in a concrete way?

IR Yes, is the easy answer to that. I’m trying to think of an example. Again, it’s the algorithm stuff, we can just make guesses or calculated guesses as to why the insights suddenly showed a massive spike in engagement or reach of verality, but you still can’t really tell why, which is why we have been so interested in insights, because if you do build up insights data over a period of time, you will have that experience, at the very least, of saying, ‘Well, that kind of happened last time so it’s possibly that.’ When you’ve got three years of data behind you, you can make better judgements than you could if you had a week’s data behind you.

SM How do other people in the company feel about the usefulness or usability of social media insights? And it depends on their role I guess as well.

IR Yeah, I think probably there’s a lot of ‘So what? 2 million people clicked your post, so what? 100,000 re-tweeted your Tweet,’ but I think that’s probably a lack of education, I think, or a lack of marketing knowledge, because I’m of the camp that engagement at any level is better than nothing, it’s got to be.

SM Do you think that the branch, the department or the role of other people within the company bears on their attitudes to social media insights?

IR Totally, yes totally. I mean it does, yes. Some marketing people think insights are great and understand it and delve down and think that it is illuminating, yet other marketing people, it’s not enough for them, they want to be able to do that matching exercise that I spoke about, and they want that personalisation aspect. And I suppose you can apply that to people around the organisation but it’s always embedded in whether they understand the possibilities of social, I suppose, which feels a bit fantasy-ish, but I don’t think it is.

SM In terms of the attitudes of people towards social media insights, from what you’ve said already, education or knowledge of what it’s about and what it signifies is determining whether people think it’s positive or negative and that sort of thing?

IR Yes, I think so. It comes back to my mantra, engagement at any level is better than nothing, it’s got to be, because somebody has taken the trouble to interact, to whatever degree, with your brand, so you can go back to the marketing theory books and see that at some point that will have an impact, the science of marketing will have an impact on that particular user, so education, yes. Difficult to persuade accountants, funnily enough, of the impact that marketing has on people I think.

SM That’s a very intriguing and interesting way you put it!

IR I actually think from our point of view that our insights would be much more robust if our own digital systems could match them, were robust enough. It’s slightly confidential, but our digital systems, our finance systems, our website, are just historic. Not historic, they’re just old and tired and they don’t talk to social platforms particularly well and I’m sure that other more agile companies or bigger brands that have invested money in their IT systems probably find much more benefit from their social insights than we do, because the digital channels are all a bit separate, whereas if they were integrated then we would be able to reap much more detailed information from social insights, but we can’t at the moment, which is a shame.

SM That’s the last part of the interview. I want to talk about some issues that arise in discussions regarding the usage of social media insights. What do you think are the strengths and possibilities that are opened up by social media data mining and insights, and obviously we’ve covered that a little bit?

IR I think, as another view, it offers ideas around creativity. So if you’re looking at insights, we often have those ta-da moments within the Social Media team: ‘Oh, they like that?’ or ‘That market likes this,’ and I know we’ve already talked about how it informs our content, but it can also inform your creativity, it can inform planning, I guess. Again, it’s still all couched in the trying to understand the customer, the customer journey, the user, and making our dialogue, our conversation, our touch points with them, more relevant. I don’t know what else it’s going to do.

SM And conversely, what do you think are the weaknesses or the problems associated with social media that are mining and insights?

IR There are ethical problems, but at the moment I don’t really think that that’s our responsibility, we’re perhaps the parasite on the rhino, as it were! Is that the right analogy? We’re kind of the third party and it’s up to the social networks to protect their users from us.

SM I’ve got a question about that. Apart from the ethical one, can you think of any other problems or weaknesses?

IR Ethical, there are barriers to particular platforms that you can’t access, so that’s a straightforward functional problem.

SM A technical hurdle.

IR Yes, and sometimes with the Buzz monitoring that we’ve done, I don’t know, I just think it’s wrong sometimes. I’ve looked at the data and thought, ‘I don’t think that’s right!’ Yes, it doesn’t ring true sometimes. And that there’s probably too much data, and again, that sounds like a dichotomy, ‘Oh I can’t drill down enough into the data but actually some of this data there’s too much of it and there’s too much to wade through.’ I can remember we did a trial with Neilsen for a week, and Neilsen, at that time, this was a couple of years ago, it took two weeks to collate the data, and then we had to look at it and it was like, ‘Oh we don’t really need that level.’ I don’t know what companies would require that level, and you can see these people, like Dell and Gatorade, they have these control centres where they’re looking at all the insights and that’s just mind-blowing, and I just wonder whether that’s necessary sometimes, and maybe it is.

SM I’m going to mention some of the issues, and we’ve already spoken a little bit about those, that get raised in relation to social media monitoring, and invite you to share your views on these if you have any. Regarding representativeness, one issue that gets raised is that people will sometimes say that what you found through a social media insight is not representative of a broad range of people’s views. Do you have any thoughts on this, is it something that has come up within your work at Non-profit 2?

IR What we’ve seen through social media insights doesn’t represent a broad range of people’s views?

SM Yes, that’s one issue that gets raised, so if you have any thoughts on that.

IR So anything that insights has shown to surprise or jolt with people’s beliefs or views? I can’t think of anything. I mean the one thing I would say is that our insights do tend to reaffirm what we know, because we are a membership body so we are very close to our customers and the students take exams, so we know whether they pass or fail, we have that luxury of having a lot of data on them anyway.

SM There’s certain proximity?

IR Yes, whereas other businesses wouldn’t necessarily enjoy that level of proximity.

SM In terms of privacy, some people have expressed concern about social media data mining, because social media users consider some of these places, so online platforms, private, even if they are technically public. What are your views on this?

IR That’s individual responsibility, isn’t it? That’s how I see it. Yes, I think individuals should be responsible for ensuring that their settings and their profiles are locked down. I probably would claim ignorance in terms of whether the platforms themselves, I’m sure Facebook, for example, does own a lot of data, even on me, and I’m probably not aware of how much data it owns on me, but I can’t comment on that necessarily, only to be as secure as you can as an individual user.

SM And another concern raised is about security. Some people express concern that even though data might be gathered in a sound and secure way, someone else might get hold of it, because you can’t control where the data goes and ends up. Any thoughts on this?

IR We’ve got quite strict IT regulations around if we collate any data from social platforms or from any kind of digital platform, we have to go through a number of check lists or whatever and use particular server providers and they all have to be checked and stuff. I would say Non-profit 2 is very hot on data protection. That’s my view on it.

SM In terms of transparency, some people say that social media data mining should be more visible so that users should be aware of it; for example, for clear and explicit statements on platforms.

IR Yes, I think that would be great. I don’t know how easy that is and it sounds in theory a no-brainer, but in practice it’s probably very hard and you’d probably get a large swathe of people that didn’t care, or certainly weren’t interested, and I don’t know how you’d present it, because it’s quite complicated, but I think it would be good. I don’t suppose they will, because at the end of the day there’s probably a commercial underlying reason for having the data.

SM Do you think that users should have the opportunity to consent to data mining?

IR I think they should, but I think they do, to a degree. I don’t engage with any Facebook apps because they always want access to my profile and my list of friends, so I just don’t, and if those gates are always there then that’s sufficient.

SM And in terms of the opportunity to opt out or opt in to data mining, do you think that an opportunity user should have?

IR Yes, I think they probably should. The world has been doing that with more physical mediums, like direct mail and email and things like that, so yes.

SM In terms of the ethical concerns, do you think social media data mining is an ethical practice, does it raise any ethical concerns for your work as an employee of Non-profit 2, for example?

IR No, and I suppose some people might not agree with me, but we’re a not-for-profit business, so our motivation, our values as a business are entrenched in giving people opportunity, and there might be some cynics to that but I do believe that that is true, education is offering people opportunity. So I think for us, we’re special and slightly different, but for more commercial enterprises I think it probably is a significant, or should be, a significant issue.

SM And are there any social media data mining practices that you or your company consider off limits?

IR I don’t know that there are any. Obviously hacking, probably! We would adhere to any kind of regulations, whatever they are, and I don’t know what they are but obviously we’re a chartered body, we’re regulated ourselves, so we would have the utmost integrity in an ethical stance on all of it, I’m sure. I don’t know what sort of unethical practices there would be around data mining, so I don’t know, but I’m sure we wouldn’t do it if we knew what they were!

SM Are there any regulations or guidelines that you as a company follow that relate to social media data mining and insights?

IR Well, yes, I think it’s called the EU Harbor Policy. Does that ring any bells?

SM Harbor Policy?

IR Mm, the EU Harbour Policy. We have a legal department and I had to ask one of the lawyers there one day about something or other, and he said that they adhere to the EU Harbor Policy, whereas the Americans don’t and in the US their data protection is not very good. That’s the only one I know about. Is that helpful?

SM Yes, that’s very helpful. That was my final question. Do you have anything else to add, comment on or ask about?

IR My only comment is that felt very confusing for me in imparting my information and I wasn’t sure that I was particularly helpful or clear.

SM I think you were very helpful, thank you very much.