

Checking out the Competition: Exploring Sprout Social's Listening Features

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Introduction & Need for Innovation or Idea

Sprout Social is an online social monitoring software that “listens” to conversations, unique posts, and messaging campaigns across the web and social media channels based on user-chosen keywords and usernames (Kordzadeh & Young, 2022). Communications professionals can then analyze the insights of the message to help develop marketing strategies based on trending topics. Social media analytics (SMA) have become an integral part of building messaging campaigns with many companies utilizing built-in tools such as Meta Business Suite to evaluate how their content is being received and interacted with by audience members (Young et al., 2020). Companies also use SMA to monitor and understand the online conversation surrounding keywords, issues, and competitors of their brand to help develop and improve communication strategies (Stieglitz et al., 2014).

Social media listening tools such as Hootsuite, Meltwater, Sprinklr, and Sprout Social allow organizations to monitor conversations. These tools serve important roles in improving the organization's brand and key messages (Wagler & Cannon, 2015). One tool, Sprout Social, compares message metrics such as engagement or reach for an organization's content along with the volume and focus of broader online conversations. Its “listening” feature monitors topics, trends, or crises happening over time by linking those chosen keywords to related ones. Sprout Social also can evaluate the online presence of competitors, which allows companies to find ways to differentiate themselves from competitors and monitor brand health (Help Center, 2024). As communications companies continue to emphasize social media strategy, students should also get hands-on experience with these tools before entering the workforce (Torossian, 2023). Agricultural communications students should be learning about SMA software to prepare and adapt to other technologies in their future careers (Leal et al., 2020). The purpose of this innovative poster is to describe how we integrated one feature of Sprout Social into a senior-level agricultural communications course in early Spring 2024. Throughout the semester, students in this course discuss trends impacting online communication and develop relevant online communication materials for real clients. With Sprout Social's Competitive Analysis feature, students could better understand the role of SMA when developing a strategic communications campaign.

How It Works

Sprout Social has many capabilities; for this activity, we used the ‘listening’ platform. To demonstrate the functionality, we created an “Industry Insights” board for the student's client, Texas Tech Davis College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. This involved choosing which social media platforms to target, adding keywords to listen for, and setting a few parameters to avoid spam or sales messages. We used this board to introduce students to Sprout Social's capabilities. To further demonstrate Sprout Social's features, students were then shown a previously created Competitive Analysis board of the top U.S. meat-producing companies. Students were able to see how the platform provides insights related to the search parameters. In addition to displaying each post identified, Sprout Social can aggregate the following data points: engagement, potential impressions, message volume, unique authors, and post sentiment.

We then asked students in the course to identify the parameters for an additional Competitive Analysis board about the Davis College. Working in groups, students completed a worksheet to identify the key components necessary to create a Competitive Analysis Board. The main considerations were to identify the primary competitors (e.g., colleges of agriculture in the region), relevant keywords (e.g., student success, research, agriculture), target social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), geographic area of collection (e.g., United States), and any terms that may need assigned sentiment (e.g., positive, negative, neutral). After the groups discussed these topics, we had a class discussion to prioritize what parameters should be used when building the Competitive Analysis board. After the class session, we built the board using the comments from this discussion along with the notes from each group. Some additional refinements were made to the search queries to allow for the most pertinent content to be collected. Sprout Social began collecting data from that point forward and after 24 hours, it provided a 30-day backfill of information as well.

Results to Date & Implications

The Competitive Analysis board displayed content from the six universities students identified. In the following class session, we shared the results with students and discussed the key findings and how those might influence their content strategy. They were then asked to individually reflect on the class activity and answer two questions on an online instrument: What were your major takeaways from exploring the Competitive Analysis results? How might you apply the information from this competitor report in your campaign plans or communication strategies? Overall, students said they found the insights from the Competitive Analysis helpful, and they saw the potential applications for their class project to develop a strategic campaign. They also wanted more time to explore the capabilities of Sprout Social's listening software. Many students mentioned how important tools like this can be to help inform a social media campaign because the metrics help discover what competitors are doing and how they may need to adjust their communication strategy to be competitive.

Future plans/advice to others

Overall, this activity went well and will be implemented in future semesters. We may leverage other features in Sprout Social to help students see the social media metrics such as the Campaigns or Publishing options. Other options for future class examples might include listening case studies of commodity organizations or other example resources to share. We encountered several limitations when reviewing the insights. Students were not able to have direct access to explore the platform's dashboard due to our limited license. Sprout Social does have a shareable interactive report, but due to internet accessibility issues, it did not fully load for all students during class time. We presented the full report on the instructor's computer, which was projected on the large screen.

Costs & Resources Needed

Social media monitoring tools with extended listening capabilities are expensive. We worked with Sprout Social to find the best package to meet our needs and still have an over \$10,000/year investment, which was provided via a research enhancement grant from the college dean's office. We can only have two "seats" and four "boards" at a time in the program. This means we have limited access and number of concurrent projects. Additional resources needed are computers, internet access, and strong Wi-Fi connections.

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