Don’t ask questions, don’t travel anywhere:

How combining social listening research with search engine analytics is helping Braun understand its global consumer better.

Executive summary

Braun felt it was missing a big part of the insight picture on male grooming, but was finding it hard to ask the right consumer questions because it didn’t know what it didn’t know.

It was looking for new approaches to help it move away from getting “more of the same” surface level results from resource intensive country by country research. It was looking for an approach that could be applicable at a global level and that helps the brand develop new innovation and communication based on better consumer understanding.

To deliver research with a global potential, but which held each country’s cultural keys at its heart, we combined a blend of social listening techniques and search engine trend analysis, to uncover and analyse thousands of online conversations and their level of influence in the USA and Japan – 2 key regions for Braun.

By removing external bias, we understood how men discuss grooming in their own environment and uncovered fascinating insight. This is now being used by the brand to break from long-standing market clichés and develop new innovation and communication.

The research itself can be replicated globally at a fraction of the resource needed by more traditional approaches.

The background and business case

For a long time, the global male grooming market has been defined solely by talk of product benefits: close, smooth, comfortable. However, the brand team at Braun was becoming concerned that this narrow, one-dimensional focus was ignoring the true depth and breadth of emotion surrounding male facial grooming. Further, Braun was concerned it was affecting its consumer communication and thinking on product innovation.

Market research plays an important role in Braun and it already has a wealth of information dealing with ‘business as usual’. However there was a sense that it was missing information, and that it didn’t know what it didn’t know. Previous efforts to understand male grooming usage and attitudes across different countries had come up short. The team was uncovering no new insights, and finding it difficult to find the right questions to get men to open up about the emotions and drivers behind the act of grooming. They needed an approach that would help them understand how men talk about facial grooming in their own words and context, and which uncovered the emotional drivers of facial grooming.

As a global company creating innovation and communication to reach as much of the world as possible, any research solution had to work internationally. Braun was particularly keen on understanding more about the USA consumer – with whom traditional methods had delivered limited beneath-the-surface success. The brand also desired more specific knowledge about Japan, one of its biggest markets. With the USA and Japan at opposite sides of the planet, the male consumer attitudes and habits of both are about as different as possible within the developed world. Any research to uncover understanding from both countries needed to be intelligent.

In particular, Braun was keen to explore:

- How and where do men talk about their facial grooming?
- What factors influence this perception and why?
- What makes groups different?
- How do men feel about grooming? What are the emotions and how are these expressed?
- How do men know what’s going to work best for them?
- What product set would best suit them and why?
- How can Braun communicate in way that will ensure the benefits resonate?
The research challenge and our response

Given these aims, the challenge for the research was to:

- Uncover genuinely new insights into the world of male grooming
- Ensure that the methodologies were consistent and comparable across the US and Japan (and therefore anywhere else should further countries be added to the work)
- Complete the work in a time frame and at a cost that ruled out traditional methods such as usage and attitude studies or any travel to the countries.

Rising to this challenge, we adopted an innovative method which combined our unique approach to social listening research with search engine trend and analysis. Each stage worked in tandem, informing and shaping the other.

1. Review

We started by identifying and analysing the main influencer sites for male grooming in both countries. This let us see what consumers see when they go online looking for advice on male grooming.

What we found was a highly fragmented and specialised conversations – one that doesn’t fit easily into the stereotype of ‘male grooming’.

2. Social listening research

From the review stage we knew we needed to approach each aspect of male grooming separately; for example, the shaving and growing conversations are very different. Because of this, different data collection and search tools were needed to capture each aspect.

Our approach to social listening research uses qualitative techniques (we read everything) to fully explore the meaning behind each comment. Far more detailed than automated text analytics, we combine discourse and thematic analysis within a grounded theory framework to fully understand and interpret what people are saying.

From this we structured the data to measure the differences between different groups across the entire data set, and compare the USA and Japan. This meant that Braun could make decisions based on insight derived from thousands of different opinions, being shared in context without any researcher or situational bias.

3. Search engine trend analysis

Social listening is an outstanding way of quantifying unstructured data and removing researcher bias. Combine it with the appropriate human-led discourse analysis and it becomes highly insightful. However, not all people actively comment online, but instead read and review existing online content. Therefore understanding the level of influence existing commentary has on those viewing it is as important as the comment itself.

Because of this we have devised a way of using search engine analytics in combination with social listening results to determine the relevancy and influence of the emerging subjects from the commentary being analysed. This allows us to see which subjects occur, on which type of sites, in which country, during which time period, and what the influence is.

This approach enabled Braun to see which subjects are informing the various aspects of the male grooming conversation, and to determine its marketing and communication strategy across different times of the year, and different moments in the consumers purchase journey, for each country. It also provides them a totally new perspective on American and Japanese male grooming attitudes:

New findings for Braun

1. Shaving and grooming are 2 distinct but inter-related conversations which men flow between depending on their state of mind, life stage or wider cultural context.

Grooming as a term is too simplistic to cover the range of emotions and experiences that men go through when it comes to their facial hair.

We found that it’s better thought of as a continual force; the hair keeps growing, so the question is what will you do about it? This eternal question is then brought into focus in three answers: you shave, you grow or you maintain. Men move between these answers for a wide range of reasons and experience the transition in many different ways.
2. The process of how to shave and the tools to use is only a small part of a much wider overall conversation.

Grooming is a gateway conversation, much like talking about the weather might be for the British!

The creative transformation of this in terms of product, packaging and communication is potentially significant.

3. There is limited spontaneous chat about hair type, ethnicity or skin type unless there is a problem. This problem can be emotional or practical.

The going in assumption from Braun was that they needed to understand much more how men described themselves when it came to the process of shaving. Although this is evident, it is only a small part of a much wider conversation and only apparent when men have a problem that they are looking to fix. In fact the grooming conversation permeates much more than that and is a key gateway conversation for guys, much like the weather is for the Brits!

4. Whereas shaving is a daily routine, beard growing is a journey, an experiment which can take men out of their comfort zone and make them open to the critique of others. The end result is something men have a strong emotional attachment to.

This is a much more evident in the US than in Japan, where having a beard or experimenting with one, is much more culturally acceptable. But for a brand like Braun, this insight shows them how they may want to start to think how to segment the world’s consumers depending on their emotions to shaving, beards and grooming.

Impact

Prior to this work Braun was unaware of quite how deep the grooming conversation went. Its own hypothesis was that they were missing exactly how men describe themselves online. They did not realize just quite how far reaching the conversation is.

In the words of the Global Associate Director of Insight, ‘this research opens up so many doors to potential new projects and new growth opportunities’.

The 3 part process can be applied to any subject and for any country to uncover new insight from existing online conversation and compare and contrast multiple countries in a consistent way without the cost or time needed to travel to each individual country, so opening up far deeper customer understanding to a much wider range of brands and businesses.