

# A Case for Using the Internet to Track Offline, Organic Word of Mouth

By Karen Kraft

A few days ago, one of my coworkers mentioned she was going to try out Super Suppers that night. When I asked her what she was talking about, she explained that Super Suppers is a company that provides locations where you can assemble entrées for six meals within an hour. After you've assembled the meals—each in its own pan with cooking directions and serving suggestions—you take the meals home, put them in the freezer, and they're ready for your family with minimal prep time.

It sounded amazing, I checked out the website, saw there appeared to be good value, and the menu seemed delicious. The next day I followed up with her and learned the food is quite good. She even said her 16-year-old son enjoys going along to help assemble the meals.

As a result of her experience, I've shown the website to my husband (who has already forwarded it to some of his coworkers), talked about the company with my boss (who's a very busy mom—their target audience), brought it up at a baby shower, and am so excited about trying it that I've chosen to include this example in this article.

Now, imagine you are the Chief Evangelist for Super Suppers. How would you ever find out about the spark that was created when my friend told me about the company? If I decided to try Super Suppers, I would have checked the box on the website registration page that said I heard about the program from a friend/relative/acquaintance. However, if I decided not to use the program, you as the Chief Evangelist would never have known about the wonderful amount

of positive word of mouth that was created when my coworker mentioned, in passing, she had an appointment a few nights ago. The original WOMUnit she created has been relayed to at least 20 people (none of whom found it through blogs, online reviews, message boards, or an amplified campaign).

A company like Super Suppers (small and relatively new) can probably rely on increased sales during a time of low/no advertising spending because of word-of-mouth activity. However, imagine you are the Chief Evangelist for a well-known, long-standing brand with a large advertising budget. How could you capture and track offline, organic word-of-mouth promotion of your brand? This seems like it could be a daunting task—almost like trying to catch a fly with chopsticks.

Traditional marketing research can help companies capture and track at least some of these episodes that are getting missed by online tracking methods. By screening everyday consumers, researchers can identify participants in word-of-mouth activities related to a brand and category, and interview them to capture and characterize episodes of offline, organic word of mouth. Yet, a potential barrier to this type of tracking is the number of consumers that must be screened to identify readable samples of senders (consumers who have distributed a WOMUnit) and receivers (consumers who have received a WOMUnit) for tracking purposes.

To determine the incidence of word-of-mouth senders and receivers in several categories, Decision Analyst conducted a screening of 2,044 consumers. In this research, a nationally representative sample of members of American Consumer

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Opinion® Online was screened—a sample consisting of men and women aged 18 to 65. Sample members were invited to complete an online survey about their word-of-mouth activity related to 54 product and service categories in the past 30 days.

The tables below summarize the top (easiest to find) and bottom (hardest to find) categories for past-30-day, word-of-mouth senders and receivers.

Thus, according to these findings, it would be easiest to find senders and receivers of word-of-mouth information about restaurants, and hardest to find senders and receivers of word-of-mouth information about home-security products and services.

Now assume a company wanted to interview 150 senders and 150 receivers in each wave of a word-of-mouth tracking program. How many potential respondents must be contacted to complete the required number of interviews? To calculate the number of contacts needed, the following formula should be used:

$$\text{Desired Number Of Completes/Incidence Percentage} = \text{Number Of Contacts}$$

Using the restaurant category as an example—if a company wanted to interview 150 senders of word-of-mouth information about restaurants, 353 consumers (150/42.4 percent) would need to be screened. However, not all consumers are avail-

able or would agree to be interviewed for marketing research purposes. So regardless of methodology—mall-intercept, telephone, or Internet panel—assume that one in four consumers (25 percent) would be willing to be screened. This factor of 25 percent would be the response rate. Modifying the “number of contacts” formula to include the response rate will result in the “amount of sample” formula as follows:

$$\text{Desired Number Of Completes/Incidence Percentage/Response Rate} = \text{Number Of Contacts}$$

Going back to the restaurant category example, a company would now need to have 1,415 consumers available in its sample for potential screening (150/42.4 percent/25 percent). When we apply the same formula to the hardest-to-find category, home-security products, a total of 37,500 potential respondents must be included in the sample to complete 150 interviews among senders in this category.

Telephone and mall-intercept research have both been experiencing declining response rates in the past several years. Caller ID and call blocking are allowing consumers to avoid even answering the phone when a research company calls. Additionally, the “Do Not Call” list, while technically not applicable to survey researchers, has heightened consumer sensitivity to unwanted calls at home. Meanwhile, more and more shopping malls are no longer leasing space to researchers or are placing

Top-Five Categories for Finding Past-30-Day Senders		Incidence
1.	Restaurants	42.4%
2.	Movies and television programming	24.9%
3.	Cell phones/Cell phone service providers	16.2
4.	Grocery/Drugstores	15.7
5.	Music (CDs, radio, MP, etc.)	15.6%

Top Five Categories for Finding Past-30-Day Receivers		Incidence
1.	Restaurants	36.6%
2.	Movies and television programming	21.9%
3.	Music (CDs, radio, MP3s, etc.) Cell phones/Cell phone service providers	13.6%
4.	Cell phones/Cell phone service providers	11.8%
5.	Grocery/Drugstores	11.4%
6.	Over-the-counter medicines (pain relievers, cold/allergy remedies, etc.)	11.4%

Bottom-Five Categories for Finding Past-30-Day Senders		Incidence
50.	Durable baby care products (car seats, strollers, playpens, etc.)	2.6%
51.	Daycare	2.6%
52.	Durable pet products (carriers, beds, toys, etc.)	2.3%
53.	Recreational vehicles (boats, motor homes/trailers, off-road vehicles, etc.)	2.3%
54.	Home security products and services	1.6%

Bottom-Five Categories for Finding Past-30-Day Receivers		Incidence
50.	Durable baby care products (car seats, strollers, playpens, etc.)	1.9%
51.	Durable pet products (carriers, beds, toys, etc.)	1.9%
52.	Daycare	1.8%
53.	Recreational vehicles (boats, motor homes/trailers, off-road vehicles, etc.)	1.7%
54.	Home-security products and services	1.0%

heavy restrictions on interviewer movement within the malls, which is affecting both response rates and the composition of the pool of potential respondents.

Researchers with large Internet-based panels, however, have the ability to pull a representative sample of records from databases of millions of consumers who have agreed to be contacted for research purposes. Since this type of screening is all completed online, it occurs in a fraction of the time it would take to try to contact the same number of potential respondents either in-person or on the telephone. Thus, the Internet has become not only a very strong sample source, but also the most time- and cost-effective method of finding consumers willing to participate in survey research.

Once screened online, senders and receivers can then be interviewed in-depth about their recent word-of-mouth activities. Using both open- and closed-ended questions, researchers can elicit descriptions of word-of-mouth episodes in a manner that allows WOMUnits, participants, venues, and actions to be profiled and analyzed. These key metrics can then be quantified and tracked over time.

Word-of-mouth tracking can either stand alone or be incorporated into a brand's regular tracking program. Incorporating this type of tracking into traditional brand tracking can have several benefits:

- Unaided and aided levels of word-of-mouth activity can be tracked and analyzed side by side with traditional brand tracking measurements, such as brand and advertising awareness.
- Word-of-mouth levels can be measured and tracked among the general population, and supplemental interviews can be

completed among both senders and receivers to obtain and quantify more detailed word-of-mouth information.

- Word-of-mouth measures can be included in customer segmentations to create detailed profiles of senders and receivers to assist in identifying the characteristics of high-potential word-of-mouth participants to recruit for word-of-mouth campaigns.

Additionally, since online research is conducted among panelists, those identified as senders and receivers can be re-contacted for further research such as:

- Participating in new product ideation/innovation
- Concept testing
- Product testing
- Advertising testing

By including senders and receivers in these types of innovation (product and advertising research) companies can identify breakthrough concepts, products, and advertising that have high word-of-mouth potential. This can be done using regular quantitative research or by recruiting panelists to online qualitative or ethnographic studies.

Now again imagine that you are the Chief Evangelist for Super Suppers. If you implement an online word-of-mouth tracking program, you still may not capture the particular word-of-mouth experience I described earlier. But you would dramatically increase your probability of capturing similar offline, organic word-of-mouth episodes. With the ability to access large numbers of consumers through their panels, online researchers can help you stop trying to catch flies with chopsticks and begin shooting fish in barrels.

## About the Author

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