

Looking for a Pulse Online in 2009

Grant Owens, December 2008

Satisfying a need that is ingrained in human behavior, connected consumers are starting to feel the pulse of the community around them.

Radio Holds the Secret

I was enjoying a mild fall evening with the car window down, and a WNEW disc jockey murmured about a nearby event. Although seemingly insignificant, that murmur captivated me. It's the end of 2008, the year of social media, yet at that moment I was utterly drawn to the radio. With all the technology and media at my fingertips, I attempted to deconstruct the reasons why radio still has a place in my heart.

Our team at Razorfish had recently worked on a couple of radio-related projects, and we were surprised by the durability of terrestrial radio. Although radio is completely surrounded by other hot media channels, which are all competing for a tiny share of each consumer's time, it persists as an important medium.

During our research, consumers professed their love for the iPod, swore by satellite radio's bazillion stations, and described "drive time," terrestrial radio's last bastion, as the perfect time to chat with friends on their mobile phones. Yet these same early adopters also had a trusted radio station with a hard and fast opinion for their preferred morning show. As a result, "passé" radio continues to touch a cord with self-described Web2.0ers.

What radio has that keeps its essence strong is a pulse. Even with criticism of airwave consolidation and playlist homogeneity, radio feels alive and keeps us connected to the community and world around us.

For comparison, the iPod is an inherently lonely device. You place your ear buds in, close yourself off to the world around you, and listen to music that hasn't changed since the moment it was recorded. Also, if something newsworthy or important happened in your community at that very moment your iPod wouldn't alert you. It's like a closed circuit of your own interests repetitively fed, sometimes shuffled, and rarely benefiting from external influences.

Sensing a Digital Pulse

With the exception of the rising social media landscape, digital media is best described as pre-recorded, pre-packaged, and downloaded. Internet servers are teeming with on-demand information, but have lacked the immediacy you receive by listening to your radio, watching on-location broadcast news, or even listening to the buzz all around.

However, digital media and all of this closed-circuitry is about to break free from these restrictions. In 2009, the whole of the web will become more live and alive. Not only will the web become more social, but it will also become instantly reactive.

Unlike user reviews and periodic blog posts, the pulse will communicate what's happening now-not delayed details on what happened.

In a setting that nears sci-fi clichés, one might picture a connected world where in one second you can sense a deep digital thump emanating from a YouTube video of a NYPD officer shoving a bicyclist, and the next second that same pulse moves over to the MySpace page of a high school hockey player named Levi Johnston.

Technologies Transmitting the Pulse

The online consumer audience will graduate from simply tapping into digital resources, to seeing what digital resources are crowded, who is tapping them and anything else they should consider consuming.

The technologies that carry the pulse are spread among fresh startups and existing services.

Examples include:

Activity Feeds: As an example, Facebook's Live Feed isn't just populated with periodic and explicate status updates, it posts any user activity. Also keep an eye on startups like groupspeak.com that are attempting to tap into real-time online conversations and feed user commentary based on their personal affinities and preferences.

Micro-blogging: Twitter remains the poster child for micro-blogging and up-to-date information feeds, but the idea has more implications than just the current offerings. As an example, John Battelle (a technology and media entrepreneur) created a unique experience for the Outside Lands Music & Arts Festival in San Francisco. He encouraged festival goers to submit thousands of camera-phone pictures, hand-held digital-video recordings, blog posts and Twitter tweets while at the event. This information feed created a "database of experiences" so that non-attendees could see near real time activity over the three-day event.

Distributed Sampling: The pulse is shared, quite literally, using efforts like Stanford University's "quake catcher" network in which seismic activity is measured by tapping into the sensors commonly found in consumer laptops. If a certain number of laptops in one area sense movement an alert is sounded. Other examples of distributed sampling include the logistics of gathering traffic patterns. Traffic data companies often place beacons on commercial vehicles and then track the pace of their flow. The implications of this tactic can go beyond traffic detours; Imagine comparing which restaurants have the longest wait time, versus how long it might take you to get to one with a shorter wait.

Live Streaming Media: YouTube recently hosted the first YouTube Live event. This simple streaming business model has been wildly successful for groups such as Major League Baseball with MLB.TV, CBS's March Madness, and even traffic cams.

Data-centric Mobile Devices: With the iPhone being a key catalyst, wireless carriers are pushing unlimited data plans like never before. Smart phones, GPS and geo-location apps within phones such as Loopt act as nodes for sharing and receiving the pulse. Spurred by the connectivity of phones, we've definitely moved beyond the site-based metaphor of a pulsing "online now" gif.

Realtime Site Analytics: As an example of advanced user data, take a look at Woopra - an analytics tool that allows live tracking of website traffic. Instead of waiting hours or even days to see usage results, site owners and potentially users themselves can get an instant snapshot of content that is hot and what is not. Digital media companies should be considering a practice of letting users see the usage analytics that are normally behind the firewall. Everyone could benefit from seeing a heat map of activity.

Don't Always Take it Personally

Much of the value derived from the pulse isn't personal like Twitter feeds or Facebook Connect data. Knowing aggregate and anonymous information can have real value to the larger web world. Feeling the Pulse of your Facebook friends most certainly delivers important influence, but many other connected consumers aren't willing to divulge their activities. Non-personally identifiable movements among the web share an important place in our sense of connectedness as well.

Knowing the anonymous pack movements, and the little buzz-starting sparks, is often what allows us to bring an idea to our personal circle. We observe events, and then choose whether or not to raise a flag for our immediate peers. Stranger and acquaintance online activity feed off of each other.

An Innovator's Opportunity

As a fellow netizen you can sit back and enjoy access to this information, but if you are a marketer or media entrepreneur, tapping into the pulse could also be very meaningful to you in three ways:

1. **Create a pulse taking product:** Develop a feature that becomes as ritualistic for users as Twitter or Facebook's Live Feed and the ad dollars will follow.
2. **Optimization or R&D:** The pulse contains key insights into consumer perceptions. Marketers can get feedback in real-time on campaigns that are resonating and those that need revisions. Content creators can even seed ideas and then see if they have legs.
3. **Foresee consumer trends and capitalize on them:** A perennial example of value in trending data comes from Wall Street. Having your finger on trends can mean the difference between profit and loss.

About the Author



As Account Planning Director at Avenue A | Razorfish, Grant has led the strategic planning of integrated digital initiatives within media and entertainment, retail and automotive. Grant's recent clients include: Ford, Viacom, CBS Radio, BMW and CNN. Before joining Avenue | Razorfish, Grant worked with Euro RSCG 4D as a Senior Planner where he led planning for BMW's relationship marketing initiatives during the U.S. launch of the MINI Cooper. Along with reintroducing an automotive icon, Grant worked with top marketers such as: Intel, Discovery Channel and IBM. Grant is a graduate of Miami University.

About Razorfish™

Razorfish is one of the largest interactive marketing and technology companies in the world, and also one of the largest buyers of digital advertising space. With a demonstrated commitment to innovation, Razorfish counsels its clients on how to leverage digital channels such as the Web, mobile devices, in-store technologies and other emerging media to engage people, build brand loyalty and provide excellent customer service. The company is increasingly advising marketers on Social Influence Marketing™, its approach for employing social media and social influencers to achieve the marketing and business needs of an organization. Its award-winning client teams provide solutions through their strategic counsel, digital advertising and content creation, media buying, analytics, technology and user experience. Razorfish has offices in markets across the United States, and in Australia, China, France, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom. Clients--many of them served in multiple markets--include Carnival Cruise Lines, Coors Brewing Company, Levi's, McDonald's and Starwood Hotels. Visit <http://www.razorfish.com> for more information.

Razorfish

821 2nd Avenue, Suite 1800
Seattle, WA 98104
Phone: 206.816.8800
Fax: 206.816.8808

For more information please visit: razorfish.com.