Super Bowl vs Oscars: social media’s winners revealed
What does great marketing look like in the social media age? Why does one piece of activity set social platforms alight when another barely resonates? And what does it really mean for the brand when it does? These are questions near the top of the agenda for any marketer – and rarely more so than during two of the biggest set-piece social media occasions in the marketing calendar: The Super Bowl and The Oscars.
Brands spent $4.5m apiece on a 30-second Super Bowl advertising spot for 2015, and while an ad break during the Oscars costs less than half as much, that still constitutes a substantial investment for brands such as Cadillac, which opted to forego Super Bowl advertising and focus its efforts on the Academy’s big night instead. A significant objective for all of these marketing dollars is to generate awareness, buzz and engagement through social media. Up to now though, there has been little means of exploring the real impact of the social media conversations they generate – and what they say about the overall effectiveness of the campaign.
Super Bowl vs Oscars: social media’s winners revealed

**Mapping success on social media**

In 2015, though, things are different. In recent years, TNS has been exploring exactly what effective marketing looks like on social media. We’ve drawn together methods informed by mathematics, physics and sociology to transform the messy, unstructured and vast datasets that social delivers into patterns that can be consumed and understood visually. As a result, we can show exactly what makes a campaign effective on social media, and what benefit that delivers to brands. By integrating our understanding of social media impact with TNS’s ConversionModel communications tracking, we can get an even fuller picture of the long-term contribution a campaign will make to brand equity. And at the same time, we can provide marketers with a basis for optimising creative and media strategy to maximise impact on social.

The maps and footprints that emerge from our research are intriguingly beautiful, and when you’re armed with the means of decoding them, deeply meaningful. We see social media interactions as interconnected lines between a universe of user accounts: constellations of conversations that take on very different shapes and forms depending not just on how far a brand’s message spreads, but on how it does so. Different social communities gravitate towards one another or spin further apart depending upon how strongly the brand’s message draws them in. When we apply this visual mapping approach to tracking the impact of Super Bowl and Oscars activity on Twitter, we don’t just reveal winners and losers amidst the different brands, we illuminate more about how amplification on social media really works.

We see social media interactions as constellations of conversations that take on very different shapes and forms depending not just on how far a brand’s message spreads, but on how it does so.
Super Bowl vs Oscars: social media’s winners revealed

**Budweiser tugs at the heartstrings pre-game**
Budweiser launched its campaign before the Super Bowl. Its 60-second spot tells the story of a lost Labrador puppy and its beloved Clydesdale horses reunited after an epic journey and a face off with a threatening wolf. It received a high-profile launch on NBC’s Today show on January 28, which generated over 14 million views on YouTube in the week leading up to the big game. This pre-planned strategy was rewarded by the highest potential reach on Twitter for any brand advertising at either the Super Bowl or the Oscars, with 26% of all ad mentions around the Super Bowl, and an overwhelmingly positive response amongst Tweeters. On the face of it, Budweiser’s Super Bowl campaign delivered exactly the type of social media impact the brand would have been looking for when it booked its slot. However, a closer look at the shape of Budweiser’s Twitter footprint suggests it might have achieved even more.

Our map of the Budweiser ad’s impact follows a classic “hub and spoke” pattern: a single, dominant, official account (in this case, @Budweiser), surrounded by a Saturn-like ring of retweets, created when those following the account and their own followers share its content with their own networks. In Budweiser’s case, this central hub dominates the social media map, because 69% of all Twitter activity took the form of retweets from that account. However, the brand also generated a large number of ‘isolates’, mentions by individuals who were motivated to comment on the ad simply by seeing it, and not by any prompt on Twitter (17% of all mentions for the ad fell into this category). Even when we do see side conversations spinning off about the ad, many are not as ‘organic’ in nature as we would like. The comet trail patterns that we see around many of the influential accounts on the periphery of the #BestBuds Twitter universe tell us that, rather than engaging in much two-way conversation, their followers are simply retweeting these accounts’ comments verbatim.
What does this mean in terms of brand benefits? The Budweiser campaign received massive amplification through the loyal retweets encouraged by its pre-release strategy, giving it genuine virality. However the hub and spoke pattern suggests that a relatively small proportion of this additional potential reach translated into sustained engagement. The key word here is ‘relative’, of course. There were a large number of occasions when a tweet about the ad did promote sustained sharing and discussion, but there were an awful lot more when it didn’t – and this is where Budweiser could find ways to optimise its creative strategy further still.

When we apply the ConversionModel communications tracking analysis to the ad itself, the reason for this pattern of Twitter response becomes clearer. The ad scored highly on Novelty and Affective Impact, with a cute puppy and noble horses tugging at the heartstrings. This was reflected in the Twitter analysis: “heartbreakingly cute”, “so many emotions I just felt in 1 minute” and “made me cry like a baby” were typical tweets. However, it did far less well on the crucial measure of Relevance. By failing to align with most of its extended audience’s personal goals and values it provided less basis for extended discussion on social – and this is reflected in a limited potential to create long-term, motivating affective memories amongst more of those who saw it. This was a good ad that generated strong recall and initial response; but not a great one when it came to translating that initial impact into long-term brand value. And the Twitter pattern provides an instant reflection of this.

This was a good ad that generated strong recall and initial response; but not a great one when it came to translating that initial impact into long-term brand value.
Super Bowl vs Oscars: social media’s winners revealed

User-generated ads crash the Super Bowl for Doritos
Response to creative is not the only factor shaping the social media response to an ad. As the Doritos Super Bowl campaign proves, brands can actively promote social interaction from the outset through the strategic approach that they take.

Doritos’ annual ‘Crash the Super Bowl’ contest provides consumers with the opportunity to break into advertising or film-making through creating their own Super Bowl ads for the brand – with consumers watching the films online and voting to choose the winner. As shown in Doritos’ Twitter footprint, this produces a far more sustained basis for authentic social media conversation. The official Doritos Twitter account still features prominently, but it represents nowhere near the dominant share of activity that Budweiser’s does. Instead, the Doritos strategy has produced other influential centres of gravity; communities that drive their own discussion around the brand.

These include the personal accounts of those entering the competition, but also the influential skateboarder Tony Hawk. The shape of these autonomous communities’ footprints is significant too: they themselves avoid the strict hub and spoke model, suggesting that an original mention by one influencer is triggering further, spontaneous conversation amongst his or her followers. The tendrils connecting many of these influencer communities back to the official Doritos account show that the brand has retained influence over much of the social interaction that it has created – or at least that the conversation tends to align with the brand’s own messages. The exception here was Tony Hawk, who had starred in Doritos ads formerly, and whose comments about the ads resonated with his own followers. Finally, the relatively large proportion of isolates (spontaneous, unprompted mentions of the two Doritos ads shown during the Super Bowl) suggests strong, unprompted engagement for the ads themselves.
Super Bowl vs Oscars: social media’s winners revealed

The total potential reach achieved by Doritos cannot compete with that of Budweiser. However, the pattern of its Twitter footprint suggests that Doritos might derive relatively more long-term benefit from its Super Bowl campaign given its size, thanks to greater efficiency in turning reach and impact into long-term affective memories. The high proportion of spontaneous mentions suggests that it performed well on Novelty and Affective Impact, and the organic conversations generated amongst its many communities suggests a far higher Relevance score than that of Budweiser. For Doritos, the Twitter map also suggests approaches for further optimising its Crash the Super Bowl strategy in the future; re-activating the Tony Hawk sub-community, for example.

The total potential reach achieved by Doritos cannot compete with that of Budweiser. However, the pattern of its Twitter footprint suggest that the brand may derive relatively more long-term benefit from its Super Bowl campaign given its size.
Super Bowl vs Oscars: social media’s winners revealed

**McDonalds loses control of the conversation**

A more organic conversational footprint is not in itself evidence of a successful impact on social media – or of a campaign that is delivering the Novelty, Affective Impact and Relevance to create long-term brand advantage. Besides the shape of the conversational footprint, it is vital to explore the content of those conversations as well.

On the face of it, McDonalds delivered a post-game Twitter response to rival that generated by Budweiser, with a roughly equal share of mentions in the week following the Super bowl. A topline view of the brand’s Twitter footprint looks promising as well, with a reasonable number of organic conversations linking back to the official McDonalds account – and suggesting a degree of personal relevance amongst users aligned with the ad’s core message. A relatively high number of isolated Twitter mentions suggests that the McDonalds’ ad showing customers invited to “pay with lovin’” rather than with cash resonated spontaneously as well. However, the inherent weakness in this brand map comes from the lack of overall connectedness to the brand’s own presence on Twitter. The presence of significant alternative centres of gravity suggests that the conversation has moved in directions not intended by McDonalds – and over which it has little ongoing control. The content of several of the tweets in these rival communities confirms as much: complaints about broken ice cream machines topping the list.

The presence of significant alternative centres of gravity suggests that the conversation has moved in directions not intended by McDonalds – and over which it has little ongoing control.
Can you transfer a Super Bowl strategy to the Oscars?
How does the social media impact of a brand vary depending on which major TV event it chooses to align itself with? When we compare Super Bowl-related Twitter footprints to those of brands investing in The Oscars we see significant differences, not least in the degree of virality that ads are able to achieve. With one exception, no brand involved in the Academy Awards achieved the same Twitter potential reach as those advertising at the Super Bowl. However, the nature of the most successful Oscar campaigns suggests that there is more at work here than simply the different social media scale of the two events. The criteria for a successful Oscars execution appear significantly different to those for a successful Super Bowl ad.

Cadillac received a significant amount of trade press attention for its decision to move spend out of The Super Bowl in order to leverage more competitive rates for Oscars ad slots. The disappointing result for the brand is that such a large proportion of the Twitter activity generated by its ads revolved around such ad industry commentary. The most dominant conversation in the Cadillac footprint revolved around the account of the marketing industry influencer, Marsha Collier. This was in part a reflection of a lower level of general Twitter interest than that generated by the Super Bowl ads. Although the high proportion of isolated mentions provides some evidence of a spontaneous response, especially to the subtle appearance of Apple founder Steve Wozniak in one of Cadillac’s spots, there is little evidence of authentic engagement with the brand as a result of its Oscars activity.

The criteria for a successful Oscars execution appear significantly different to those for a successful Super Bowl ad.
Beyond advertising at the Academy’s big night
Could this be a result of a TV audience that is less predisposed to respond to advertising than that of the Super Bowl, where expensive, hotly anticipated ads are seen as very much a part of the experience? The nature of the two most successful Oscars-invested brands on Twitter suggest this might be the case. The Twitter footprint of Dove wasn’t created by ads but by a well-judged social media campaign focused on the red carpet commentary that characterises Oscars night. Dove set its sights on negative comments about how women look, a position that aligns with the brand’s long-running Real Beauty campaign. The Twitter footprint that results has far more in common with a successful Super Bowl campaign than that of Cadillac. Dove’s own Twitter hub is closely integrated with that of the conversation generated around the campaign through Mashable, and also with a range of other social media influencers, who each triggered organic conversations around their own networks. It also benefited from a high proportion of spontaneous mentions by isolates, including a very impactful mention by one Dubai-based account.

The Twitter footprint of Dove wasn’t created by ads but by a well-judged social media campaign focused on the red carpet commentary that characterises Oscars night.
And the Oscars winner is…
However, the biggest winner on Oscar night was the brand that had integrated itself most closely with the ceremony itself. Thanks to its movie, Lego achieved a potential reach on social media that was comparable to that delivered by Super Bowl ads, and the pattern of the conversation is extremely healthy from a brand perspective: large numbers of isolates indicating spontaneous mentions, combined with authentic, organic conversations that link back to the core brand. The fact that Lego missed out on a nomination for Best Animated Movie only seemed to increase the level of support on Twitter, as did its move to hand out Lego versions of Oscar statuettes during a performance of the film’s popular song. The pre-existence of Lego communities ready to respond to its activity was also a powerful asset. The artist @nathansawaya, who creates sculptures out of Lego bricks was just one of many hubs ready to generate their own spontaneous conversations.

Lego achieved a potential reach on social media that was comparable to that delivered by Super Bowl ads, and the pattern of the conversation is extremely healthy from a brand perspective.
Super Bowl vs Oscars: social media’s winners revealed

What does a great campaign look like on social?
To come back to our original question: what does a great campaign look like in the age of social media? As these examples show, the marketing execution itself could take a range of different forms. It could involve a user-generated ad, a pre-release strategy, a passionate campaigning stance or a major investment in content. However, the patterns that these activities create on social platforms will always have core characteristics that mark them out as a success – and do so long before traditional ad effectiveness studies would judge them that way. We know what authentic brand alignment and engagement look like on social – and by analysing the characteristics of the brands that achieve them, we can advise on better strategies to achieve them. Those strategies could involve advertising creative designed with hooks to provoke the interest of different communities; they could involve social media executional support that reaches out to diverse anchors of influence amongst its target audiences; they could involve pre-seeding communities – or reaching out to potentially supportive ones. However, they will always involve an approach that is designed to establish relevance and a sustained basis for social conversation as well as initial impact. As these maps show, social media success is about much more than simply going viral.

The patterns that these activities create on social platforms will always have core characteristics that mark them out as a success – and do so long before traditional ad effectiveness studies would judge them that way. Social media success is about much more than simply going viral.
Super Bowl vs Oscars: social media’s winners revealed

About Intelligence Applied
Intelligence Applied is the home of the latest thinking from TNS, where we discuss the issues impacting our clients, explore what makes people tick and spotlight how these insights can create opportunities for business growth.

Please visit www.tnsglobal.com/intelligence-applied for more information.

About TNS
TNS advises clients on specific growth strategies around new market entry, innovation, brand switching and customer strategies, based on long established expertise and market leading solutions. With a presence in over 80 countries, TNS has more conversations with the world’s consumers than anyone else and understands individual human behaviours and attitudes across every cultural, economic and political region of the world.

TNS is part of Kantar, the data investment management division of WPP and one of the world’s largest insight, information and consultancy groups.

Please visit www.tnsglobal.com for more information.

Get in touch
If you would like to talk to us about anything you have read in this report, please get in touch via enquiries@tnsglobal.com or via Twitter @tns_global

About the author
Kyle Findlay
Kyle is the Senior Research Scientist at the TNS Global Brand Equity Centre (GBEC) in Cape Town, South Africa. Kyle has been intimately involved in the development of solutions such as the ConversionModel and models of consumer influence. He is also one of the primary architects of TNS’ technology-enabled research offers which incorporate big data such as social media content.

For more information contact kyle.findlay@tnsglobal.com

You may be interested in...
Why real-time marketers need a better radar >