

MAKE YOUR STAKEHOLDERS SMARTER

MOVING BEYOND THE DASHBOARD AND INTO CONFIGURABLE INSIGHTS

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INTRODUCTION: EVER TRY TO SELL DIGITAL MEDIA?

Imagine you sell digital media. Imagine you are meeting with a client prospect and you have to differentiate your portfolio of online properties and solutions from hundreds of others all competing for the same share of budget. Imagine your job depended on it. You know that price is an important variable in sealing a deal, but you are also well aware that data holds an even greater value for clients. Data in the form of proof, in particular, is highly meaningful for the simple reason that demonstrated past success indicates future performance. Now imagine that your CEO even mandates that no one in the company is allowed to leave the building and meet with clients without data. “What are typical Video Completion Rates across your properties for the Finance category?” “When you run Mobile assets for Tech advertisers, how is Ad Engagement affected?” “How does Native advertising affect key Brand Building metrics such as Brand Favorability or Purchase Intent among Automotive marketers?” These are all perfectly reasonable questions for any digital ad buyer, strategist or client to ask, and the lack of easy access to the answers is one of many barriers for growing sales.

Imagine that as a digital media sales manager, you are now on the hook for delivering this intelligence to your clients. Where do you turn to get this data? Who do you talk to? How long will it take to weave together?

Now imagine you could access these highly specific, detailed insights within a couple of minutes, using your iPad. Imagine the scenario where you have just met with a client in which you were able to un-earth their needs. Minutes after returning to your office, you have surfaced proof points that address these new data requests - proof points projectable to your overall performance, based on trillions of ad events – not just one-off case studies. Even better, imagine you showed your client the answers during the actual meeting, completely impromptu, within five taps of your iPad or clicks of your mouse. Lastly, imagine you could do this for every client. And imagine your entire sales organization had the same exact capability, with little to no training.

This may sound like a future Blue Sky state for our industry, but it is not. It is the world of Configurable Insights; it helps get deals done by making your stakeholders smarter, and it is happening today.

WHERE HAVE THESE INSIGHTS LIVED UNTIL NOW?

Before we reveal the seemingly magical solution to the seller’s challenge, let us explore why the current state of knowledge sharing often falls short. Put simply, data and insights live in only two places: 1) the brains of researchers and 2) files and folders typically buried in the team’s networked shared drives. The brain of a researcher is different than the typical person.

FIGURE 1. EMERGENETICS 1

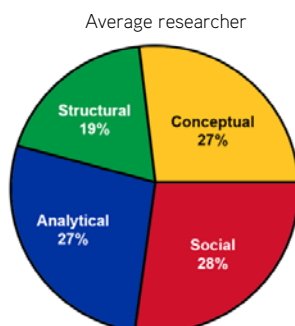
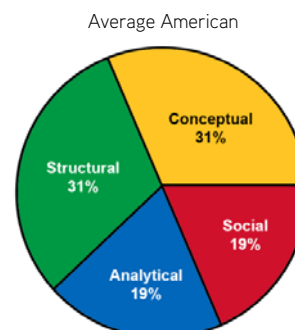


FIGURE 2. EMERGENETICS 2



Marketing intelligence industry professionals process information differently than the rest of the population. Research shows that we are far more analytical in nature with keener senses of comparison, driven by clear thinking, rationality, and deeper inclination to learn by mental analysis. The brain of the average American is less analytical, which is understandable, and it is also more structural. Structural thinkers tend to be more practical, they like guidelines, are cautious of new ideas, are more predictable, and learn by doing (Browning, 2005). It is easy to see how analytical brains are far more valuable to the marketing intelligence world and why many of our colleagues request our presence in meetings and conference calls where data will be presented and discussed.

Another important barrier of researcher brains is that they are in our heads. Our brains are nicely walled off from other people (encased behind ½ inch of solid bone – inaccessible, un-democratized and most certainly password protected). At AOL, tens of thousands of sales meetings and calls happen each year, but only a small fraction are attended by our Consumer Analytics and Research team members. Bandwidth is a real barrier. What happens when data requests occur in the meetings we cannot attend?

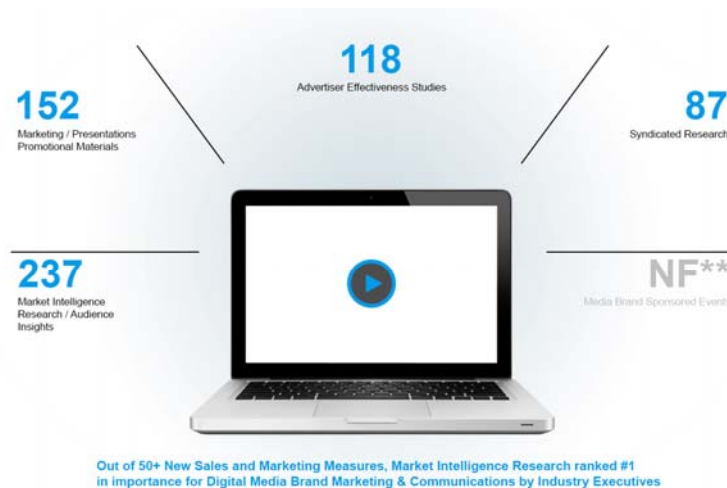
Presentations, webinars and white papers prepared by our research team can be effective forums for sharing knowledge, but these are simply extensions of the researcher brain. One can make the case that these deliverables are also of an ephemeral nature. “If you remember one thing from this presentation” is often heard during closing remarks in conference rooms across the globe. This is a presenter’s cue, a nod to the fact that “this knowledge is nicely engrained in my brain because I’ve lived it for the last several months or years – I can only expect you to walk away with one or two ideas.”

The other place insights reside is in marginally navigable corporate networked shared drives and Intranets. These systems might be good for archiving and team collaboration, but they are terrible for knowledge sharing.

The unfortunate irony here is that a tremendous amount of latent value exists within these systems: millions of dollars of brand tracker results, hundreds of individual campaign/ad effectiveness studies and countless data-infused sales presentations and post campaign analyses. These insights-rich materials are often presented to a room of fewer than 10 people and then rest, un-touched for eternity in a networked shared drive called, “Consumer Research”, “Analytics Team Share” or even something less descriptive like “O Drive.”

While this data is very difficult to find, it is still very valuable. At AOL, demand for the legacy data of the Consumer Analytics & Research team grew so dramatically that our stakeholders from other teams, including Strategy, Marketing and Category Solutions, asked simply that we give them access to our networked shared drive. “We don’t know what we don’t know” was the rationale of the request.

FIGURE 3. MARKET INTELLIGENCE



This demand for intelligence is good news. The Advertiser Perceptions AIR report, featured in figure 3, illustrates that research and market intelligence is the most important driver for industry executives as they consider their digital media partners, a fact which matches the AOL ideology of using data to sell (Advertiser Perceptions, 2014).

But what is a seller to do when the two primary sources of this highly valuable information are behind locked gates – a researcher’s brain and a networked shared drive? How do we enable them to access this revenue-driving data more efficiently? How do we make them smarter?

THE NEED FOR CONFIGURABLE INSIGHTS

As insights executives, we need to unlock the value of this work to extend its life and to accelerate achievement of our stakeholders’ goals. Imagine what they could learn if we are able to combine all of the research AOL had conducted over the past 12 – 24 months and arrive at a normative view of how our digital properties and products perform.

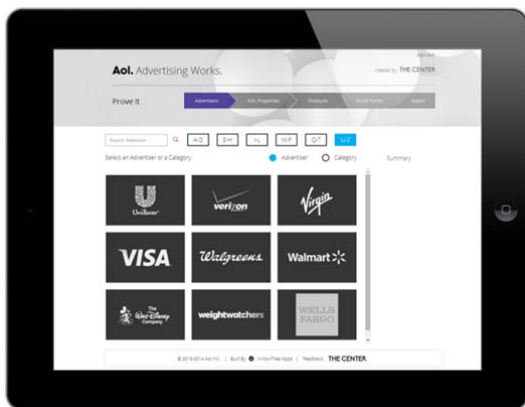
We’ve seen this challenge at AOL and realized the answer could be found in a software solution. And because proof of effectiveness is such a critical factor in the budget allocation process, we simply named our new app, “AOL Advertising Works.”

The new platform needed to address a few scenarios to help our account executives close advertising deals:

- The need for proof orientation: For the scenario where a client requests solid proof that past campaigns exceeded performance benchmarks, looking at the combination of properties and ad products/solutions.
- The need for immediacy: For the scenario where a client asks for insights around a proposed advertising package and needs a reply today.
- The need for ease of use: Sellers are neither data nor dashboard experts. They need to be able to navigate this platform in only minutes, with minimal or no training.
- The need for client-ready output: Sellers are busy and should focus their time solving client needs, not manipulating data into slides. The output needs to be professionally-formatted, data-rich PowerPoint slides – ready to send to the client or include in a larger presentation.

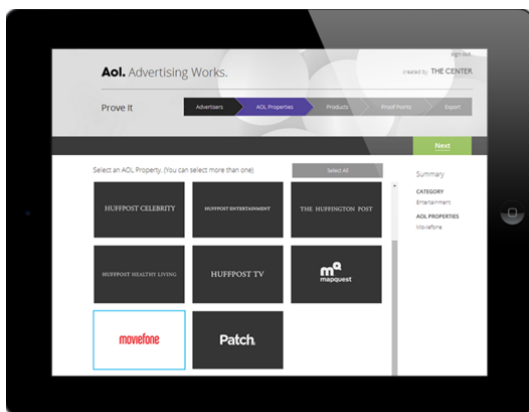
Is a web app like AOL Advertising Works going to enable our eager salesperson to enlighten clients with easy to access Proof oriented insights? Yes – in a way no other publisher has done to date. Here’s how it works:

FIGURE 3. STEP ONE: CHOOSE AN ADVERTISER OR CATEGORY



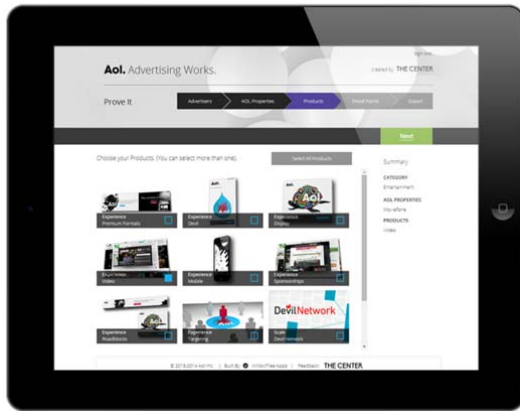
- View and download normative, proof oriented, insights across 130 advertisers and 10 categories
- Icon look ups are a far friendlier user experience than shared drive folder names

FIGURE 4. STEP TWO: CHOOSE A SET OF PROPERTIES



- Select from 40 different AOL brands
- Combine properties to view deeper insights

FIGURE 5. STEP THREE: CHOOSE A PRODUCT



- Select from ten products such as Video, Mobile, Network and Branded Content
- View product combinations by clicking multiple icons

FIGURE 6. STEP THREE: EXPORT TO SLIDES



- Insights focus on proof points across Brand Building, Engagement and Performance KPIs
- Data is in PowerPoint slides, formatted in the approved AOL template and are ready to be inserted into a larger presentation

The AOL Advertising Works app enables any AOL executive to access our most powerful data in a couple of minutes. After clicking the “Get Proof Points” button, the user simply clicks a Product Category or Advertiser, then clicks an AOL Property, and lastly clicks an AOL Solution. The next screen shows the output for preliminary, “modal” viewing. The modal view allows the user to scan the slide and decide if it meets their needs prior to fully exporting it. The export process takes five seconds or less, and it downloads the PowerPoint file directly to the user’s desktop.

Additionally, because it was built as an HTML5 Web app, the tool works on PCs as well as on tablets. This is important to certain sellers as they try to engage in conversations with their clients without the physical wall of a laptop in between. Increasingly, media executives are using tablets to drive face-to-face conversations. Because AOL Advertising Works is already optimized for tablets, it will not require a re-build once tablets for business achieve critical mass.

WHY DON'T DASHBOARDS WORK

Dashboards do work, and often work very well, for researchers. But remember, we have analytical minds and the specialized training to make effective use of dashboards. This difference cannot be over-stated when thinking about how data is presented. Consider the following outputs, one from a conventional dashboard and one from the AOL Advertising Works app:

FIGURE 6. DASHBOARDS ARE USEFUL TO MARKETING INTELLIGENCE EXECUTIVES

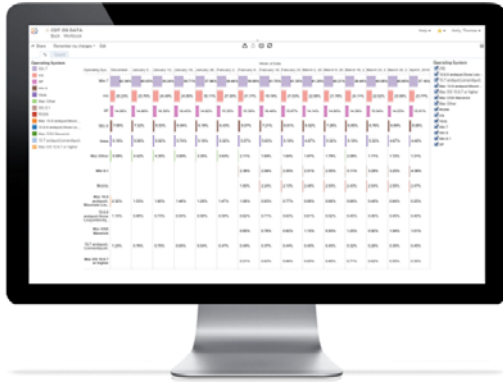


FIGURE 7. CONFIGURABLE INSIGHTS ARE USEFUL TO ANYONE



The difference between a dashboard and a platform like AOL Advertising Works is like the difference between data and insights. It is the difference between simply providing someone a chart or graph versus actually doing work for them, as in less work they have to do.

Put yourself in the place of our media seller once again. Would it be more efficient for you to log into a dashboard, specify a number of variables and arrive at a data table or bar chart? You would still need to internalize that chart and distill its meaning into one or two succinct “so whats” for your client. Then, you would have to download, copy or literally reproduce that chart in PowerPoint and format it to ensure that it matches the style of all your other materials and slides in your larger presentation. Or, would it be more effective to simply specify a few parameters using a Wizard-type user interface and then immediately export a pre-made slide, complete with charts and insights/recommendations, pre-formatted and designed? Of course the answer is clear: the latter option is easier, faster and more valuable. With AOL Advertising Works, our account executive is looking pretty smart right about now.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NORMATIVE DATA VS CASE STUDIES

What we have built here lives on top of a normative database backed by 36 trillion ad events. When clients ask for proof that a program works, the seller immediately faces a fork in the road. They can either cherry pick the best story that most closely reflects the recommended strategy or they can be comprehensive (not to mention more transparent and honest), and look across *all* of the instances that most closely match the proposal. The former is a “case study” and the latter is a “normative database.”

The difference between these two is one of the most important distinctions in digital analytics and research, but it is also one of the least realized. A case study is typically a view of a singular campaign or ad effort that saw remarkable performance. It is, by definition, an outlier - a sample size of one.

To be sure, case studies are very important communications vehicles when explaining an abstract marketing concept. They are also useful when explaining the tenets of a new product. Custom content development or native ad efforts, for example, are best explained for the first time using a visual case study. So they do have their place in the account executive’s sales bag.

But the challenge with case studies is that because they represent only one example of success, they are not predictive. Most case studies chronicle an outstanding performance by a single marketing campaign, that perfect combination of variables yielding a result which is most likely an atypical one. Sometimes, case studies can mislead and essentially set a very high benchmark, and other attempts at duplicating it will fail to replicate.

A normative database, however, represents unfettered truth. It represents an average or benchmark against which other performances can be fairly compared – which is very different compared to a case study.

Examining very large normative datasets of AOL-specific performance by category, property, product and KPI was the exercise that revealed, for example, that TechCrunch works very well for entertainment advertisers and that Moviefone demonstrated great results for brands in the technology category. These were elusive insights, and the serendipity of that type of data mining allowed us to unearth less intuitive pockets of success.

Large normative datasets can be intimidating and difficult to weave together—considering the very diffuse nature of the sources. However, many groups within digital marketing are far too reliant on case studies to prove that their programs work, when they are often isolated events and reflect sample sizes of one. Imagine the power and stability of a sample size of 36 trillion ad events...

WHAT DATA ARE WE MINING?

It's not uncommon to use a mining analogy in the data world. In the mineral mining world we're digging into the Earth for resources that have been created organically over millions of years. The irony of the data-mining world is that we're actually the ones who have buried it. And the data we've buried generally takes three forms:

1. **Brand Building:** Millions of dollars per year are spent on ad effectiveness research for individual campaigns. We aggregated results across almost 200 campaigns where branding research was conducted
 - Metrics: Brand Awareness, Ad Recall, Message Association, Sponsorship Association, Brand Favorability, Purchase Intent
 - Sourcing: Custom ad effectiveness normative database housing over 150,000 survey responses
2. **Engagement:** The average American attention span has decreased from 12 seconds to 8 seconds since 2003 and that makes our jobs harder – unless you can showcase how you are harnessing consumer attention successfully (Harald Weinreich, Hartmut Obendorf, Eelco Herder, and Matthias Mayer – 2012). Engagement metrics like Interaction Rate and Interaction time are the backbone to this capability.
 - Metrics: Interaction Rate, Interaction Time
 - Sourcing: Ad Engagement data from a partner housing 36 trillion ad events in 2013 - followed by normalization & weighting
3. **Performance:** We focused on Video Completion Rate for this KPI realm and compiled results from across over 15,000 campaigns. We included CTR in v1 of AOL Advertising Works, but this may be a metric we eliminate from future iterations as it has no correlation at all with offline sales and is of limited use.
 - Metrics: Video Completion Rate, Click Through Rate
 - Sourcing: AOL Data Warehouse using SQL queries into Netezza & Vertica databases for ad activity, clicks & conversion data

We created a newly aggregated data set which powers both binocular level broadness as well as microscopic understanding of marketing variables. Most importantly, this data aligns with the outcome-oriented measurement demanded by clients.

CMS – THE CONNECTIVE TISSUE

Just because you've un-earthed a newly aggregated set of data doesn't mean you've solved the corporate shared drive issue. You still have to democratize and build an easy pathway to this new body of work with an understandable taxonomy. We did this by finely meta-tagging our insights slides based on their key points and themes. This is called the Content Management System or CMS.

It's critical to identify the most clear common themes throughout your body of insights because that's what's going to dictate the icons, buttons and overall flow of your user interface. A broad narrative is unlocked on the unique selling proposition and value of your offer when you've effectively deduced these themes and appropriately tagged your content accordingly. This technique makes the narrative more easily digested by your constituent base and allows the UI to be more user-friendly.

DATA-FOCUSED CULTURE

Even though research shows unambiguously that marketers crave empirical evidence to fuel their decision making, a senior executive team who is fully invested in insight adoption certainly helps. In 2012, AOL's Chief Executive Officer, Tim Armstrong, issued a decree that "No one was allowed to leave the building without data." An all too familiar practice of selling using pictures, lunches and smiles was immediately put on an evolutionary fast track as a result, and infusing all materials with powerful and relevant data became a core responsibility of the research and analytics team.

Within weeks our team escalated the operationalization of data from across syndicated and primary sources in order to better drive revenue. These steps laid the groundwork for the idea and creation of the AOL Advertising Works app. The data-focused culture at AOL compels our teams to be receptive to learning how to position normative, aggregated insights stitched together from our diffuse research.

FIGURE 8. LEAVING WITHOUT DATA?

No one is allowed to leave the building without data. Our virtual data doorman at AOL's New York headquarters

IMAGINE IF ...

The future state of Configurable Insights is now. The account executive, who needs to deliver proof that native advertising achieves brand building objectives for automotive advertisers, can accomplish that task within minutes. And every one of their colleagues can do that as well. Thanks to AOL Advertising Works, and a focus on Configurable Insights, the team is, well, smarter.

Stepping into the role of the seller once again, there is probably a lot of additional data you wish you had data beyond addition to proof points. Imagine if you had data about what motivates consumers in any given product category. Imagine if you had on-demand data about the purchase path, how it varies by category and consumer segment. Imagine if you had, at your fingertips, insights on emerging platforms and how people are adopting devices. Imagine if you had current information about how media use was shifting. Would it not also be very valuable to click an advertiser's logo in the app and see an instant snapshot of what their media spending – both with AOL and your competitors? What if you could compare that to the client's competitors? Imagine if you could generate mock-ups of solutions automatically as well. We are not this sophisticated yet. We have a lot of work to do to get there. But based on our experience building AOL Advertising Works, we know the path forward now. And through all of the trials, experiments and mistakes we made during the creation of version 1.0, we are in a much better position to accelerate the progress of configurable insights. Imagine the power of version 2 or 3 or 7 of a tool like this. And imagine how it has the potential to completely reframe the relationship between an account executive and the client, all on the foundation of data and insights. Now imagine how you could apply these principles to your own organization.

Imagine.

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