2011 Customer Complaint Index

How negatively-motivated search behavior can help brands get closer to their consumers.

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Executive Summary

When consumers experience a product failure, they use search engines to find places to register their complaints. This leaves data trails which can be used to anticipate and react to their needs.

Using over 100 brands featured in recent "Best Global Brands" reports form Interbrand, we extracted Google data on almost 1.2 million search queries related to customer complaints, to extract meaningful insights around the very fundamental consumer need to make their opinions heard.

Here's what we found:

- Automakers such as Toyota show the highest volumes of Complaint Queries, but brands like Nokia and McDonald's also worked their way towards the top of the list.
- As a share of all Branded search queries, however, Financial Services brands owned four of the top six positions.
- While many brands currently underutilize the advertising opportunity that comes with these search queries, Automotive and Electronics brands have thus far led the way.
- Within the rapidly growing mobile space, the most active complaint-driven search behavior is focused on Restaurant brands.
- During the 2010 holiday season, Amazon.com saw their volume of Complaint Queries more than double – but a wide variety of other brands experienced a similar increase.

Based on a variety of metrics, this analysis casts the role of customer complaints in a unique light – with some unexpected results. Brands like BP and Goldman Sachs dealt with serious image problems in 2010, and yet they did not dominate the charts.

Photo: Associated Newspapers Ltd.

Another welcome surprise is the use of complaints as a catalyst to progress in building customer satisfaction. Banco Santander of Spain was so inundated with customer dissatisfaction in 2010 that they were forced to overhaul their entire complaint handling procedure. In the process of fixing the problem and improving their relationship with customers, they experienced a rapid rise in Complaint Queries – proving that a customer's need to provide negative feedback can be used to the brand's advantage.

More insight into the search profile of customer complaints, and how brands can respond, can be found in the following 2011 Customer Complaint Index.

Santander urgently dealing with complaints following a Financial Mail investigation

By JEFF PRESTRIDGE
Last updated at 4:28 PM on 20th September 2010

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Santander, the country's fastest-growing bank, is urgently overhauling its complaints procedures after a month-long investigation into its appalling customer service by Financial Mail.

In an exclusive interview, retail director Alison Brittain says the Spanish-owned bank is determined to improve the way it deals with complaints, especially those resulting from basic errors that are not then dealt with promptly, causing customers to become increasingly frustrated.

'We know we haven't been fast and speedy in our response to some customers' complaints and we are absolutely committed to fixing that,' she says. 'We can't compete long term if we don't deliver decent service standards.'

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Introduction

"The customer is always right."

Business leaders have long acknowledged this adage, even when it proves to be inconvenient, sometimes even nonsensical. What's remarkable about this philosophy is how well it has stood up to the test of time. Through economic sea changes and technological advancements, the prevailing wisdom continues to dictate that if you treat a customer well, they are more likely to come back and buy again. Because retaining a customer is far more cost-effective than acquiring a new one, this policy speaks directly to profitability in brand building.

It stands to reason, then, that if a customer does not enjoy a smooth ride, they represent a potential threat to the brand. A product fails to meet expectations, and a void remains where a need should have been met. In the absence of that comfort, the customer is compelled to complain.

People can be very creative and doggedly persistent in finding outlets for their complaints. This is nothing new, but what is changing nowadays is the environment in which consumers can register their dissatisfaction. In 2011, many customers' complaints are public, indelible, and ultimately, a potential business asset. Unlike the earlier days of the Internet, the dialogue between brands and consumers is omni-directional, more open to peer influence, and much more emblematic of a true community. And with search query data to quantify this propensity to complain, we can properly can size up the marketing opportunity within this dialogue.

The cliché that the web is "going social" effectively means that peer influence online has finally begun to resemble its offline equivalent. Consumers benefit by acquiring a new voice of reason in their purchase decisions – with 9 out of 10 listening to that voice. And companies benefit, because they now have a substitute for panel surveys, focus groups, opinion polling – all the imperfect tools they use to extract consumer insights.

So, how about we do away with the stigma of the complainer? If we stop and listen to these complaints once in a while, we might learn something.

The embrace of online reviews within brands' and retailers' online environments has even prompted eMarketer to proclaim the dawn of "a more enlightened approach to handling negative comments… the acknowledgment that occasional negative reviews do not hurt sales." When powered by insights found in online conversation, quality assurance and customer service become competitive advantages, and add value to marketing, finance and product development. This approach can touch virtually every aspect of the business.

By observing behavioral patterns when using search engines, and then listening to what consumers say once they find the right forum for their feedback, brands can deliver a better experience for all of us – which will give us a lot less to complain about.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this entire report, we ask our readers to remain mindful of a very important distinction: Complaint Queries are not complaints, per se. When a consumer accesses a search engine and inputs a Complaint Query, this generally signals their intent to formally register a complaint, and/or browse complaints registered by other consumers. While there exist a number of verbs and adjectives whose presence in a search query might actually comprise a complaint (e.g. "I hate my Chevrolet mechanic"), we do not consider this type of search activity to model the aforementioned consumer intent. The Customer Complaint Index is intended to help brands develop organized approaches to managing complaints – and in no way do we claim to have the magic formula to eliminate them all together.
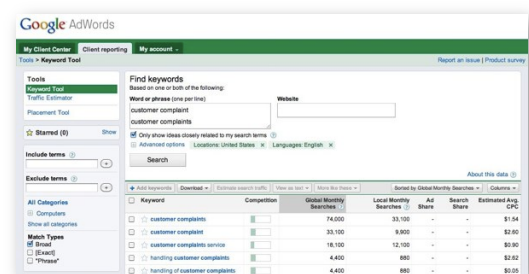
Objective

Most purchase-oriented behavior on the web begins with a search engine.[1] In the process of moving towards purchase, a prospective customer looks to educate him or herself from all angles, which often includes a review of public complaints about brands. These complaints are posted by existing customers, many of whom also use search engines to identify the channels in which to provide this feedback. Both groups use these public forums to achieve different ends, and their propensity to search for them lends insight into how brands can better meet their needs.

Using a sample of well-known global brands across a variety of industries, this report sets out to explain the nature of this unique search behavior and unify it with online conversations about brands. At the intersection of the Search and Word-of-Mouth channels, we find a number of opportunities for marketers to connect with this highly engaged audience and add value to the relationship.

Methodology

This report and its findings revolve around one core metric: search engine queries related to complaints about brands (referred to throughout the report as "Complaint Queries"). This data was sourced entirely from Google's AdWords Keyword Tool (pictured below). When measuring the volume of Complaint Queries for a given brand, we included a number of query combinations. Using broad match settings in the Keyword Tool, however, we were able to assess the raw volume of Complaint Queries using simply the singular and plural versions of [brand] + [complaint(s)].[2]

For the 2010 version of the Customer Complaint Index, the list of brands included in the analysis was generated by Google's suggestion algorithm built into the Keyword Tool. For the 2011 report, due to fundamental changes to the Keyword Tool (see Disclaimers in the Appendix), we abandoned this approach and instead opted for an inclusion process based on a more widely-accepted taxonomy: the Best Global Brands report published by Interbrand. (For more on Interbrand's selection process, see Limitations below.)

A total of 110 brands are included in this analysis, a list comprised of every brand that appeared on either the 2009 or 2010 Interbrand lists. This approach allowed us to incorporate year-over-year changes in brand value into our analysis, in turn drawing correlations on how customer complaints are related to such changes.

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[1] "The Virtuous Circle: The Role of Search and Social Media in the Purchase Pathway," GroupM & comScore, Feb 2011.
[2] Search volume data was limited to queries recorded in the U.S. region, with English set as the default language.

Once the definitive list of brands was established, we downloaded the raw data and parsed the entire output into a single spreadsheet delimited across the following variables:

• 110 unique brands (for the entire list, see Appendix)
• Monthly subtotals
• Desktop/Laptop vs Mobile devices
• Advertiser Competition
• Total Branded Queries[3]

These variables were added to Interbrand's industry classifications, listed below:

• Alcohol
• Beverages
• Diversified
• Financial Services
• Internet Services
• Restaurants
• Transportation

• Apparel
• Business Services
• Electronics
• FMCG
• Luxury
• Sporting Goods

• Automotive
• Computer Software
• Energy
• Home Furnishings
• Media
• Tobacco

Certain brands are comprised of more than one search keyword. American Express is a good example; while most people query the keyword "american express," a significant portion use the more colloquial "amex." In our view, both are reflective of awareness of the same brand, and therefore, both are incorporated into a single blended figure. For other brands such as Citi, Coca-Cola, Harley Davidson, Ralph Lauren and Volkswagen, this approach was instrumental in properly sizing up the query volumes used in our analysis.

According to Google, the Advertiser Competition metric reflects the number of unique advertisers bidding on a particular keyword. Google does not explicitly identify the geographic origins of this metric, but our research indicates that it is based on Local (i.e. United States) query volumes.

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[3] A Branded Query is defined as any search query containing the brand name, including Complaint Queries.

Key Conclusions

Below are five key insights, based on the search trends underlying complaint activity, which brands can use to anticipate and react to their customers' needs. Each insight is followed by **specific recommendations** on how it can be put to use.

1) No major brand saw more Complaint Queries than Toyota. We've established that this high number need not be viewed entirely as a negative; given that, the real question is: "How does Toyota plan to handle these tens of thousands of complaints?"

The most immediate opportunities resides within the Complaint Queries themselves. If Toyota were advertising on all Complaint Queries, they would have access to detailed search query reports which would identify important modifiers appearing in the query (keywords other than "Toyota" and "complaint," e.g. brakes, accelerator, hotline). This would provide baseline context, and Toyota then could delve deeper into these terms with a brand monitoring tool, to broaden the reach of their analysis beyond just search engines. They could then focus the discussion on their customers' most pressing concerns, helping to resolve the crisis and put the brand on the path toward recovery.

2) Santander managed to rebound from a customer service nightmare, but not before accumulating a deluge of bad press. With an ear to the ground, they'd have identified the trending complaints sooner and been in a position to put out small fires without attracting attention.

The mindful application of Word-of-Mouth data can help brands create a strategic asset such as a forum, blog or community in which the brand and consumers can engage in honest dialogue. Not only does this build confidence in the brand, it also provides it with an efficient distribution mechanism for communication with a larger audience. It's a far more sustainable approach to customer service than having to persuade consumers to re-establish trust after a well-publicized quality failure.

3) Automotive and Electronics brands saw the highest rate of advertiser competition on their Complaint Queries. Anyone competing in this space should be leveraging two related opportunities:
a) growing their brand awareness (showing ads next to competitors' Complaint Queries)
b) building loyalty within their base by taking issues head-on (with ads showing next to their own Complaint Queries)

Even in the face of a negative experience, a lot of consumers still retain positive aspects of their relationships with brands. For Automotive and Electronics brands (and virtually all others), the online dialogue surrounding a brand lends support to its development of a proper creative strategy. For example, what would cause a loyal customer to change brands? What type of incentive would be

required to retain them? A well-informed communications strategy is a key step toward building or restoring their trust in the brand.

4) McDonald's, Burger King and other Restaurant brands saw especially high levels of Complaint Query activity coming from mobile devices. These brands tend to be forward-thinkers in the field of mobile marketing, but given the nascence of many mobile technologies, innovation in this space can be a risky endeavor. What they need is some qualitative reinforcement to support their outreach initiatives to mobile consumers.

What would be a more compelling offer: SMS-based coupon codes, a promotion rewarding check-ins via Foursquare, or a photo contest via the brand's Facebook page? Marketers will often use a variety of research methods to glean this kind of information from consumers – but by asking the questions themselves, they introduce biases to the equation. By gaining an understanding for how their audiences choose to interact while they're not being watched by marketers, it is possible to deliver real value… instead of a disruptive message which only elicits groans.

5) Complaints about Amazon.com more than doubled during the holiday shopping season. While no one in their marketing department ought to be surprised by this, opportunities to leverage these engaged customers are sometimes foregone for budgetary reasons.

Insight into seasonal Word-of-Mouth trends can be an essential part of the media planning process, and retailers are a good example. Combined with the WOM-powered approach to creative messaging (see #3 above), the anticipation of spikes in specific customer needs ensures that when additional media resources are needed to capture low-hanging fruit or put out fires, the money is there to do so. It's a sure-fire way to mitigate costs and capitalize on high-ROI opportunities, padding the efficiency metrics of ongoing campaigns.

Data & Analysis

1. Total Complaint Query Volume, monthly
Which brands attract the most Complaint Queries?
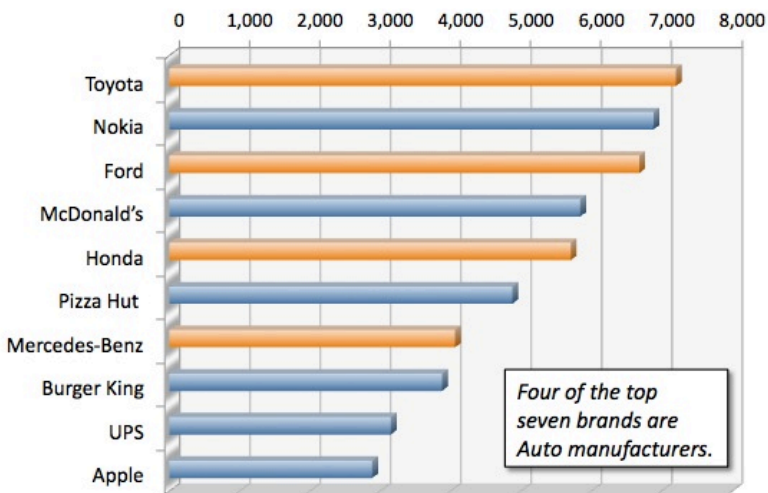
In 2010, we saw more Complaint Queries (7,203 monthly) attached to Toyota than any other brand. Nokia was a close second with 6,883 per month. While the top ten brands for this metric show a diverse set of names, it's worth pointing out the relative dominance of the Automotive category (Ford, Honda, Mercedes-Benz join Toyota in the top seven).

Other auto brands appear high in the rankings: Hyundai (13), BMW (22), Volkswagen (27), Lexus (30). The only auto manufacturer with zero recorded Complaint Query activity? Ferrari.

Automakers are on the Complaint Query front lines, with Restaurants not far behind.

In a customer-facing business, sooner or later you're going to turn some people off. It appears that's what is happening in food service, with McDonald's (4), Pizza Hut (6), Burger King (8) and KFC (12) all garnering loads of Complaint Queries. These Restaurant brands all show a strong profile in attracting mobile complaint queries (see #4, Total Complaint Query Volume from Mobile Devices, monthly).

It should be noted that these raw volumes are shown irrespective of the brands' overall query volumes. The Toyota brand, for instance, was queried almost 13 million times a month overall on average, compared to 3.6 million for Nokia. The result is that Nokia exhibits a much higher share of their Branded search queries focused on complaints (see #2, Complaint Queries as a Share of Total Branded Queries).

Nearly one-third of the brands in this analysis (35 total) showed zero Complaint Queries in Google; the majority of these belonged to the Alcohol, Luxury and FMCG[4] industry sectors.

2. Complaint Queries as a Share of Total Branded Queries
Which brands saw the highest proportion of Branded search queries in the form of Complaint Queries?

> Measured in terms of frequency of Complaint Queries, four Financial Services brands appear among the top six.
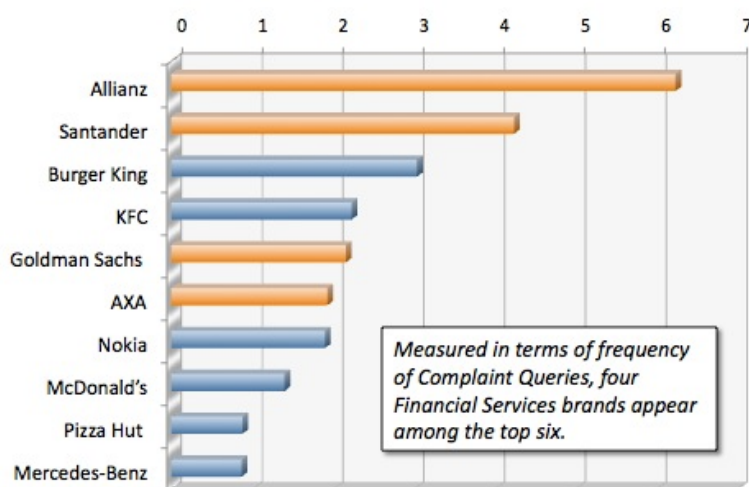
(The chart above shows the top brands, measured by Complaint Queries per 1,000 Branded Queries.)

As discussed earlier, the raw volume of Complaint Queries does not correct for imbalances in the brand's inherent search volume. After all, some brands are simply searched for less frequently than others, by virtue of the industries in which they compete and the markets they serve. Thus, it is also worth looking at Complaint Queries as a share of all Search Queries for a given brand. Since search activity reflects a certain rapport between the brand and its stakeholders, this is a more accurate reflection of how prominently the customers' complaints figure into that relationship.

Financial Services saw the highest proportion of Complaint Queries, relative to overall Branded Queries.

Clearly the change in measurement standard brings about a different perspective; if not for Mercedes-Benz, the Automotive industry would be completely absent from this list. In its stead, we see two Financial Services brands at the top – Allianz and Santander. Goldman Sachs and AXA appear slightly further down at numbers five and six. Again, Restaurant brands ring in a strong showing (Burger King, KFC, McDonald's, Pizza Hut).

What are some explanations behind some of the brands at the top of this list? In the past year, Allianz has come under fire for various reasons, including a class action suit brought against it in the

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[4] FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) refers to retail goods that are generally consumed within a short amount of time, as opposed to durable goods or appliances. In the U.S. we sometimes call these Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG).

United States, and a problematic joint venture in India. It is possible that in their case, no single event explains the high levels of Complaint Query activity. Rather, it may be a reflection of a U.S. insurance industry that has come under increased scrutiny in the wake of the financial crisis. As more Americans are affected by the economic downturn, it is not surprising that many consumers would be emboldened to look more aggressively for places to record their dissatisfaction. (None of this, however, could stop Allianz from climbing 14 spots to a #67 ranking on the 2010 Interbrand list.)

In the case of Santander, on the other hand, a very different set of circumstances is in play. Mounting dissatisfaction among the general public with the Spanish bank's customer service record led it to publicly acknowledge its failures. They charted a new course in September 2010, led by a re-engineering of the bank's complaint handling processes. Through a six-month period prior to the announcement, the brand saw an average of 982 Complaint Queries per month; from September through the end of the year, that number nearly doubled to 1,923.

Santander claimed that by the end of 2010, total complaint volumes (irrespective of Complaint Queries in search engines) had fallen by 20%.[5] Clearly, a rise in Complaint Queries can reflect changes for the better, and is as much an opportunity as it is a threat.

3. Advertiser Competition among Complaint Queries
Which brands' Complaint Queries attract the most advertisers?

Nine of the 15 most competitive Complaint Queries are Automotive brands – including the top five overall.
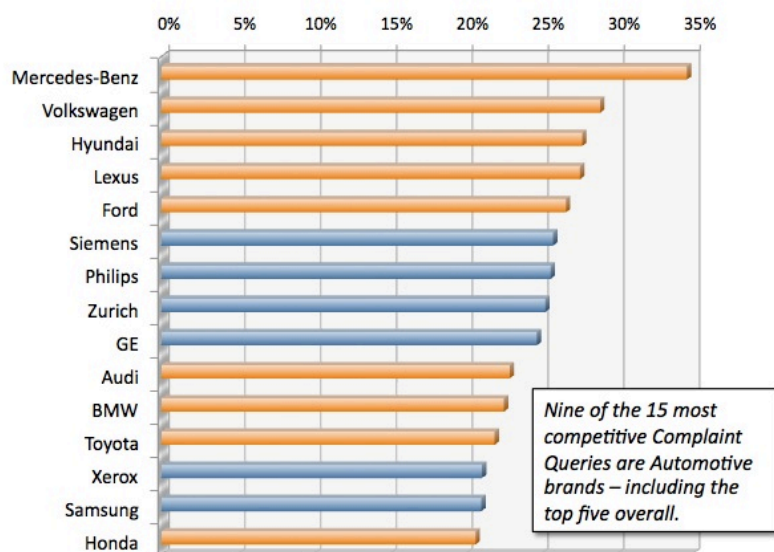
Complaint Queries represent a unique type of advertising inventory – and a ripe opportunity for innovative search marketers. If a brand is in the news for publicized quality failures (such as Toyota in early 2010), advertising on keywords related to Complaint Queries offers the chance to take

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[5] "Banking complaints rise by 15pc," The Telegraph, March 6, 2011.

ownership of consumer dissatisfaction and keep the dialogue where it belongs: between the consumer and the brand, with little or no third party influence.

Advertisers in the Automotive industry lead the way in leveraging Customer Complaints to their marketing advantage.

However, they too have a long way to go. Below is an excerpt from our 2010 study:

> *"On Friday, January 22, 2010, queries for "toyota recall" went through the roof, according to Google Insights for Search. With an unprecedented degree of interest in this keyword, a major reach opportunity for marketers presented itself – literally overnight. Yet apart from Toyota themselves bidding on that keyword to alert consumers about its new safety advisory, it's a ghost town on the search results pages. Where's Honda reminding us of its impeccable safety record? Where's General Motors telling Americans, "there's more to the GM brand than our customers' complaints?"*

A competitive brand can leverage such an occasion to reinforce its own quality record, touting its customer satisfaction and loyalty as a compelling point of differentiation. With a resonant message and a positive user experience for subsequent site visitors, it's a rare opportunity to inspire changes in brand preference and pry away market share.

The Electronics segment also deserves recognition from this particular perspective; joining the nine auto makers shown above, three Electronics brands (Philips, Xerox, Samsung) also appear. Two others (Philips, GE) are not classified as Electronics by Interbrand, but nonetheless own strong positions in this space.

It could be that marketers have product recalls in mind (their own, or competitors') when chasing advertising opportunities like this, given that the Automotive and Electronics industries are especially prone to well-publicized recalls (an anecdotal review of ad copy appearing next to these search results confirms this).

4. Total Complaint Query Volume from Mobile Devices, monthly
Which brands attract the most Complaint Queries on mobile devices?

Restaurant brands attract the most Complaint Queries input from mobile devices, based on raw volumes.
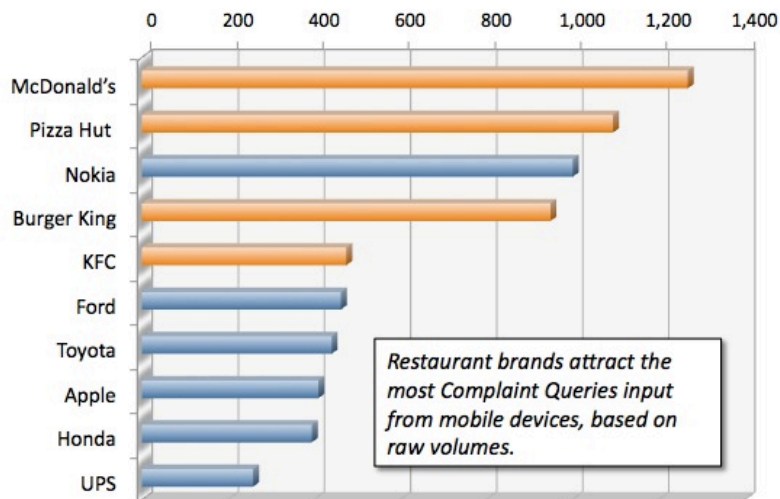
It's become trendy for pundits, at the beginning of each year, to tout the arrival of The Year of Mobile. In 2010, whether or not it made mobile's year, the industry began to see an undeniable trend emerge: a quickening adoption of mobile search. Performics estimated that 8% of clicks within Google paid search results came from mobile devices in November 2010, and projects this number will double to 16% by the end of 2011.[6]

Restaurants see the highest volume of Complaint Queries on mobile devices.

If we limit our research on Complaint Queries strictly to mobile devices, we no longer see the Automotive brands in pole position. Instead, they've been supplanted by Restaurant brands, four of which reside among the top five.

What remains to be seen is, do the Restaurant brands maintain their dominance when analyzing their proportional share of all Branded search queries? For the answer, see the very next chart (#5, Mobile Complaint Queries as a Share of Total Branded Queries).

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[6] "Was 2010 the Year for Mobile Search?" Performics. December 10, 2010

5. Mobile Complaint Queries as a Share of Total Branded Queries
Which brands saw the highest proportion of their Branded search queries (on mobile devices) in the form of Complaint Queries?

The top five are all Fast Food (Quick Service Restaurant) brands.
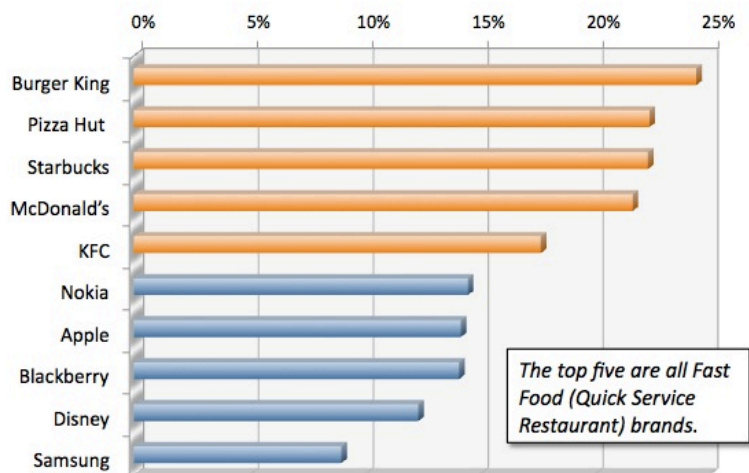
From this vantage point, we see primarily the same contenders as "Total Complaint Query Volume from Mobile Devices" (above), though curiously Starbucks has shot through the ranks to join Burger King, Pizza Hut, McDonald's and KFC. (Interbrand does indeed classify Starbucks as a Restaurant.)

In line with the Performics findings, on the whole we found that 8.7% of Complaint Queries originated from mobile devices. The majority of the brands in this analysis showed zero mobile Complaint Queries; in fact, the ten brands shown below are also the only brands in our study that registered a share above this 8.7% benchmark.

On mobile devices, Restaurants see the highest ratio of Complaint Queries to total Branded Queries.

Manufacturers of mobile communication devices, not surprisingly, are also particularly privy to Complaint Queries entered by consumers from mobile devices (with Nokia, Apple, Blackberry and Samsung among the top ten). The inherent bias for these brands (classified by Interbrand as Electronics) along this specific metric was not lost on us. Their consumers not only skew much higher for mobile device ownership, they also have ready access to a mobile search engine at the exact moment most product failures occur.

This only makes the Restaurants' numbers all the more noteworthy. Brands in this category tend to be forward-thinkers in the realm of mobile marketing, with strong execution of mobile couponing and location-based marketing tactics. McDonald's has even put NFC (near field communication) to successful use in its loyalty programs. If their customer service is as sophisticated as their marketing, the high numbers in the chart above represent tremendous upside – and all brands competing in high-touch, client-facing service industries would be wise to take note.

6. Growth in Complaint Query Volume during the Holiday Season (December 2010)
Which brands saw their Complaint Query volumes spike the most in December 2010, compared to the rest of the year?
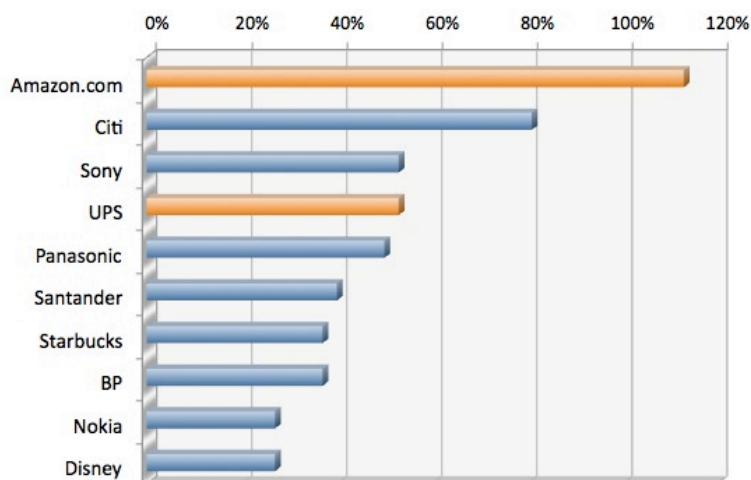
When the holidays draw near, we know to expect significant changes in the marketplace, and we measure these changes in a variety of ways: financial indicators, media performance metrics, qualitative research, and so on. Now we can look at the trends in consumers' propensity to complain.

With annual sales of $34.2 billion in 2010, Amazon.com is by far the largest online retailer. Like most of its competitors, its annual revenues are buoyed by the fourth quarter, specifically the year-end holiday shopping blitz. Increased turnover shouldn't come as a shock, and perhaps neither will a certain indicator of consumer satisfaction:

In December, Amazon's average number of Complaint Queries more than doubles.

Amazon, however, is not alone. UPS is privy to the same seasonal spike in activity within the shipping business. With more packages being purchased and shipped, even impeccable customer service cannot stave off an increase in complaints. But as always, the bottom line financial indicators tell the definitive story: UPS ended Q4 of 2010 with revenues up 8% over the prior Q4. In Amazon's case, the number is an eye-popping 42%. Someone over there is doing something right.

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Appendix

Full list of brands

The following brands were included in this analysis: 3M, Accenture, Adidas, Adobe, Allianz, Amazon.com, American Express, Apple, Armani, Audi, Avon, AXA, Barclays, Blackberry, BMW, BP, Budweiser, Burberry, Burger King, Campbell's, Canon, Cartier, Caterpillar, Chanel, Cisco, Citi, Coca-Cola, Colgate, Corona, Credit Suisse, Danone, Dell, Disney, Duracell, Ebay, Ferrari, Ford, Gap, GE, Gillette, Goldman Sachs, Google, Gucci, H&M, Harley-Davidson, Heineken, Heinz, Hermes, Honda, HP, HSBC, Hyundai, IBM, Ikea, Intel, Jack Daniel's, Johnnie Walker, Johnson & Johnson, JP Morgan, Kellogg's, KFC, Kleenex, L'Oréal, Lancôme, Lexus, Louis Vuitton, Marlboro, McDonald's, Mercedes-Benz, Microsoft, Moët & Chandon, Morgan Stanley , MTV, Nescafé, Nestlé, Nike, Nintendo, Nivea, Nokia, Oracle, Panasonic, Pepsi, Philips, Pizza Hut , Polo Ralph Lauren, Porsche, Prada, Puma, Rolex, Samsung, Santander, SAP, Shell, Siemens, Smirnoff, Sony, Sprite, Starbucks, Thomson Reuters Media, Tiffany & Co, Toyota, UBS, UPS, Visa, Volkswagen, Wrigley, Xerox, Yahoo!, Zara, Zurich.

Limitations

1. Google does not have a monopoly on Search. As of January 2011, Google's share of all search engine queries is 65.6%.[7] Other search properties such as Microsoft Bing, Yahoo! (powered by Bing's technology), Ask and AOL occupy measurable slices of the market. While Google's dominance is noteworthy, what sets it apart is the quality of its publicly available data. The Google Keyword Tool is what makes the Customer Complaint Index possible. This means we need to work within its constraints (more on this below), and also requires us to generalize Google search behavior as indicative of all search behavior. In future releases of this report, we plan to explore ways to defy this limitation.

2. Constraints within the Google Keyword Tool. In August 2010, Google took its updated Keyword Tool out of beta, amid much controversy from the search marketing community. While the tool offers significant enhancements,[8] the most obvious drawback is its strict adherence to search results from Google.com. (This omits Google's third-party search partners from the equation, resulting in substantially lower search query estimates across the board.)

3. Imperfections in data sourcing. Furthermore to discussions of the Keyword Tool's limitations: at a given point in time, Google retroactively shows a maximum of twelve months of data. Generally, it is early in the month that the data for the previous month becomes available. However, in January 2011, data delivery from the Keyword Tool was met with substantial delays on Google's part. This in

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[7] "comScore Releases January 2011 U.S. Search Engine Rankings" comScore, Feb. 11, 2011
[8] "5 Reasons Google's New Keyword Tool is Better" Search Engine Watch, Dec. 24, 2010

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turn delayed our data sourcing process enough to leave part of our data set reflecting the time period from February 2010 to January 2011. This interrupted the twelve-month trend (Jan-Dec 2010) that we had intended to use in this analysis. Without any recourse to recover this data, we were forced to use eleven months of data: February 2010 to December 2010. We minimized the effect of this limitation by working with monthly averages instead of yearly Complaint Query volumes. We also were forced to refrain from any speculation on the seasonality of Customer Complaints – truly a sacrifice we haven't taken lightly.

4. The Nokia effect. The Finnish mobile handset maker is conspicuously present on many graphs in this report. In some cases, there is an intuitive explanation. To some degree, however, Nokia's numbers have been skewed not by marketing, operations, or customer service – but rather the legal department. Throughout 2010, Nokia's ongoing legal battles with Apple littered the newswires, with the word "complaint" often appearing prominently (especially in the case of a "patent complaint"). Though Google's Keyword Tool shows no significant data for "patent complaint," we acknowledge that situations like this can skew our data, and serve as a reminder of the behavioral complexity of the search keyword "complaint."

5. Interbrand's methods of brand selection and valuation. According to Interbrand's website, brands selected to the Top 100 list are evaluated based on three criteria: financial performance, the strength of the brand, and its role in consumers' purchase decisions. Measures of financial performance are subject to biases in forecasting methods, as well as peripheral calculations based on qualitative research (e.g. Interbrand's expert panel assessments). We also acknowledge that a substantial number of brands on Interbrand's list are owned by private companies and thus subject to less stringent laws on financial reporting. Brands which do not earn at least one-third of their earnings outside their home country are not deemed "global brands" and do not make the Interbrand list. They also do not rank certain brands such as airlines, due to difficulty in separating the brand's contribution to sales from other externalities. For more on Interbrand's methodology, please visit Interbrand.com.

6. The effect of price on the psychology of the complainer. We acknowledge that some product categories inspire more complaint activity than others, simply because of the price point at which brands in the category compete. FMCG (CPG) is a good example of this; 9 of the 13 brands studied showed zero Complaint Queries. These brands may be just as prone to product failure as those in Automotive or Financial Services, but compared to purchases worth thousands or millions of dollars, filing a complaint on a $5.99 box of cereal might seem like a waste of time.

This calls for more research into the nature of the customer's need, as well as the complaints themselves. If a person ingests something toxic from a cereal, the result can be as dramatic as a car accident or financial ruin. The seriousness of the complaint would transcend the price of the product, at times with immeasurable detriment to the brand. By anticipating these trends on a more qualitative basis, brands could take a more proactive approach to risk management than simply waiting for consumers to start inputting Complaint Queries once disaster has already struck.

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About Web Liquid

Founded in 2003, Web Liquid is a digital marketing agency which places Word-of-Mouth (WOM) insight at the core of all our marketing programs. By delivering a proposition built around meaningful, customer-centric dialogue, we help our clients inspire confidence in consumers, trust in their brands and better ROI. Web Liquid maintains offices in New York, London, and Lagos, Nigeria. http://www.webliquidgroup.com

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