

PULSAR*



How Sign Salad use Pulsar to understand the semiotics of personal health

Case Study – Sign Salad

How Sign Salad use Pulsar to understand the semiotics of personal health

Challenge

Sign Salad is a cultural foresight consultancy specializing in semiotics and language analysis. For over 17 years, it has been helping clients to uncover cultural insights and foresight, essentially looking at how culture will change and how brands can respond to those changes. We spoke to Katrina Russell, Director at Sign Salad, who says that “one of Sign Salad’s key principles is that brands are inseparable from the culture that surrounds them. When consumers choose one brand over another, there is a wealth of cultural meaning that they, often unconsciously, bring to that decision.”

Semiotics, which is the study of how signs and symbols communicate meaning, is the foundation of Sign Salad’s approach. “We’ve been conditioned from childhood to interpret certain signs in certain ways. If you put balloons and a black wreath on the same front door – signs that communicate celebration and sorrow – people have to do a lot of work to understand what’s going on in that house, because these two signs are telling contradictory stories. The same exact thing happens with branding. Brand touchpoints that combine contradictory signs/symbols will leave consumers confused about whether or not they should walk toward that ‘front door’, or rather, that brand.”

One of the great benefits of semiotic analysis is being able to articulate the reasoning of consumer behavior across different contexts and jurisdictions. Katrina and her team “identify the cultural conditions that have created these big patterns and shifts that we’re seeing on the social media landscape.”

So where does Pulsar fit in for Sign Salad? Katrina tells us that, “the lovely Pulsar team are distinctly brilliant.” Flattery aside, Sign Salad looks at the cultural conditions that created consumer opinions and attitudes. They don’t talk to consumers directly to get the insights – “consumers are very unlikely when asked why they chose a punky-looking craft beer to say ‘it’s because of the breakdown in institutional authority in UK culture.’” Hence, their research method “works brilliantly with Pulsar because the results are indirect feedback. Social media has been described as a kind of huge



“Combining Pulsar with in-depth cultural analysis enables us to give clients context for why consumers’ preferences are the way they are – and not just what’s already happening in culture, but where is culture moving to, what the green shoots of change are that consumers themselves may not be aware of yet.”



Katrina Russell
Director, Sign Salad



focus group.” Sign Salad looks at social data in two ways, which “Pulsar effortlessly enables.”

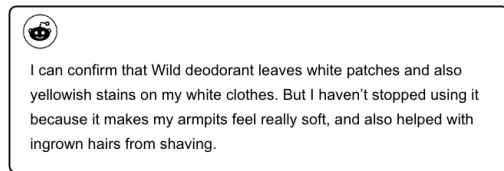
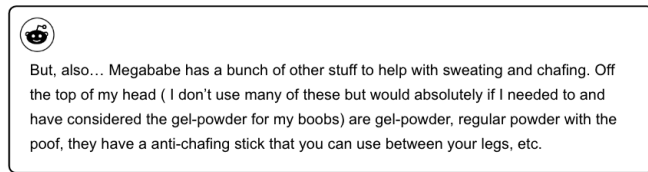
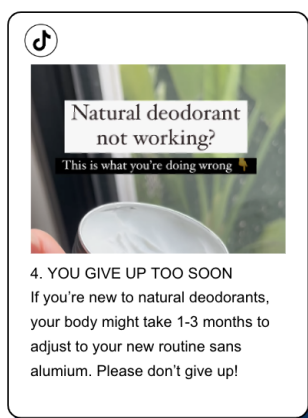
The team uses Pulsar to look at dominant, mainstream trends and the emergent green shoots of culture. Katrina tells us that natural deodorant has “risen pretty rapidly very recently as a category in public consciousness,” despite products having existed for some time.

As a semiotician, Katrina is led to wonder “how and why did that happen?”

Natural deodorant goes against the mainstream deodorant category whose narrative of sweat blocking and prevention has dominated since the 1950s. The semiotics of deodorant hasn’t changed much either – 70-year-old advertisements show women’s deodorant branded with daisies and men’s deodorant alongside images of



yea i'll stick to the cheaper one, i ain't got money for a 14\$ deodorants that will go in a month



sporty activities. Newer, ecologically-minded deodorants and aluminium-free products have brought new semiotic cues with them. “Running a natural deodorant search on Pulsar enables us to analyse the patterns in those cues, all in one place.”

Solution

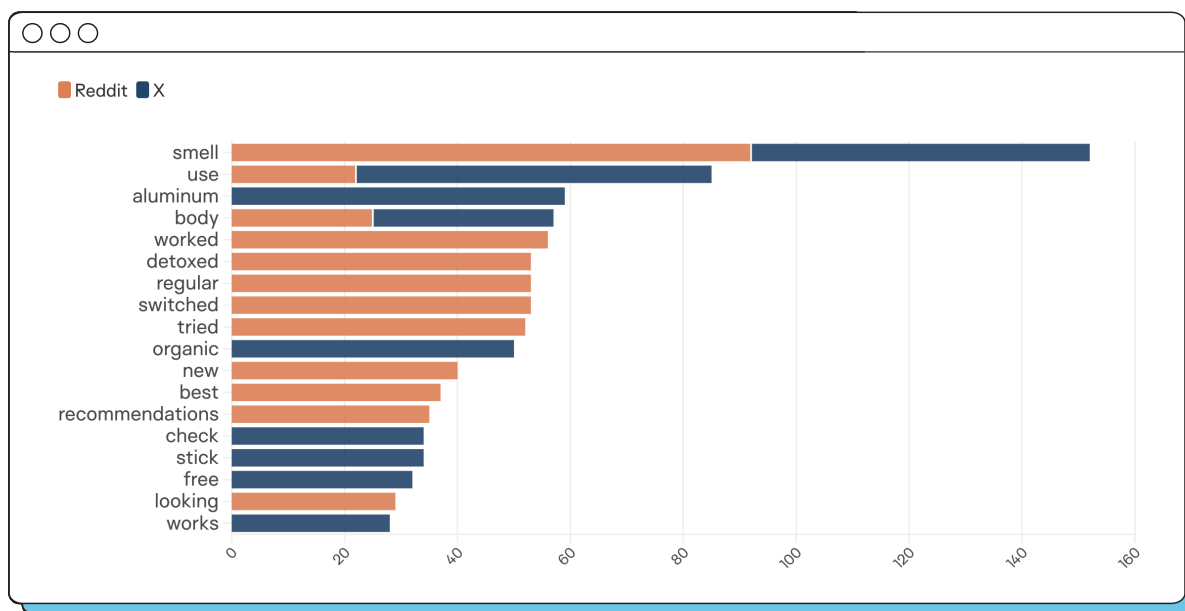
“Pulsar’s topic searches reveal what is being spoken about in the culture at the current moment.”

Katrina used a brand-agnostic topic search to gather “all mentions of different keywords and phrases,” within the natural deodorant conversation to “really get a sense of the category in online conversations, and which brands are drawing attention, from Instagram to Reddit to reviews to TikTok.”

She notes that Sign Salad usually runs a Pulsar

panel search concurrently to “understand what are the people who are a bit closer to this category to find where culture is moving towards.” A panel search tracks content from a specific ‘panel’ of experts and influential voices, which Sign Salad research and choose depending on the category – e.g. mixologists for bartending, or dermatologists for a skincare project. All this combined “builds out a very comprehensive cultural landscape through which to answer client’s questions.”

Using Pulsar, Katrina is able to “gather information and ask: what are professionals talking about? How does that differ from the en masse conversation online? Where is the overlap? What is not yet being picked up perhaps?” Because Sign Salad know that culture doesn’t sit still, a big part of their methodology is “looking at where has culture been, where is culture now, and where is



culture moving to – and working out where the client's brand should go next.”

Katrina found that “natural deodorants represent a bit of a semiotic playground.” Like other disruptive ‘natural’ products, natural deodorant is “throwing the rules out the window and being much more experimental and novel,” and providing “tantalizing” novel insights that take nuance, curiosity and adept tools and minds to uncover.

Solution

From her search, Katrina found key insights into the conversation around natural deodorant. The search revealed that the conversation around natural deodorant differs between social media platforms. X and Reddit conversations focused on ingredients and efficacy, with X's most popular words being ‘smell’ and ‘aluminum’ and Reddit's being ‘smell’, ‘worked’ and ‘detoxed’. Meanwhile, Instagram boasted a thriving promo/salesy conversation around natural deodorants, with words such as ‘available’, ‘summer’ and ‘fresh’ standing out. This provided Katrina with key insights as to where natural deodorant brands could place themselves within the conversation. “Pulsar has so many instant, effective and interactive dashboard and data visualization tools,” Katrina tells us. “We always use those in projects and to build out our slides.”

However, “while these were the most mentioned words, this doesn't mean they represent the most significant insight from the data.” Katrina's research methods involve “combing through the results quite methodically” to look at topics that might not be the most mentioned, but are still really significant – “and the platform enables you to do that really effectively.” Katrina's



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method is to use Pulsar to “work out very easily what the bigger picture is,” then dive deeper to ask “what this smaller pool of results may be telling us – to identify the potentially niche community insight this client can really tap into.”

One golden insight Katrina found is that natural deodorant is a “barometer for our comfort level with actually having those taboo-free, quite destigmatizing conversations around discomfort.” The communities speaking about their natural deodorant journey created a “very supportive, horizontal social landscape” with a “big drive towards removing stigma around bodily functions” such as sweat, body odor and body hair.

Furthermore, the product acts as a catalyst for big-picture conversations such as the intersection between antiperspirant and mental health, as evidenced by natural deodorant brand Fussy collaborating with mental health charity Calm. Katrina found that the product category becomes a touchstone for “how we perceive and relate to our bodies as a whole.”

This led Katrina to find audiences were “framing the process of using a natural deodorant as a “really pleasurable ritual,” rather than traditional deodorants which are used “quickly and invisibly – semiotically framed as though you don’t want anyone to know that you even put deodorant on.” This mindset leads natural deodorant to be an object of pride – “these natural deodorants are designed to be objects of display.”

With the information from their social data search, “combining Pulsar with in-depth cultural analysis enables us to give clients context for why consumers’ preferences are the way they are – and not just what’s already happening in culture, but where is culture moving to, uncovering the green shoots of change that even consumers themselves may not be aware of yet.”

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