



WHITE PAPER

There's Nothing Neutral About Neutral

December 22, 2009

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Sentiment analysis is very precise art. Scientists have been working on building highly reliable analysis processes for many decades now. As such, it may be surprising to learn that there are no clear cut processes for assigning numerical values to verbatims. It continues to be an art.

Every researcher using sentiment analysis has built a unique process that best suits their specific needs. They have made a decision about what the purpose of their end result is, and how they must present their results to meet that purpose.

This paper will give an overview of how some of those processes work.

How are Verbatims Coded?

There are a number of standard options available for coding verbatims. As shown in the illustration, one can choose a binary system that offers just two options such as positive and negative, or agree and disagree. Or, one can choose a categorical or continuous option that allows for more than two options.

In the first binary example, a choice must be made about what to do with neutral responses – either put them aside, slot all of them into negative (or positive), or slot each one into either positive or negative. The binary response is used less frequently in survey research, while the categorical and continuous options are used quite frequently. For example, any survey that provides the options of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree is asking responders to consider their point of view and try to fit it into one of five categories.

Binary

- 2 groups
- Two possible scores (e.g., 0 or 1)
- Positive/Negative
- Agree/Disagree

Categorical

- Several groups
- Several possible scores (e.g., 1,2,3,4,5)
- Positive, Neutral, Negative
- Agree/Undecided/Disagree

Continuous

- Unlimited groups
- Scores include decimal places (e.g., 1.37, 4.82)
- Strongly agree to strongly disagree and all points in between

What Exactly Are Neutral Verbatims?

The simplest answer is that neutral verbatims have no emotions associated with them. Similar to newspapers, descriptions of fact are usually void of emotion.

Let's consider a simple 5 point categorical scale, reflective of the five point likert scale that is traditionally for marketing research studies. The five point scale includes two extreme points of view, one positive and one negative, as well as two moderate points of view, one positive and one negative. In addition, there is a final option that reflects the lack of any point of view.

The illustration below offers some simple examples of the types of phrases that would be assigned to each of the 5 points of a Likert scale. Verbatims that get assigned to the positive and negative boxes clearly fit into those categories. And, there is a distinct difference between the types of verbatims that are assigned to Top Box and Box 2, just as there is a distinct difference between Bottom Box and Box 4 verbatims. For our purposes, the verbatims that get assigned to the neutral box do in fact represent verbatims that have no negativity or positivity associated with them.



Why does neutral matter?

There are a number of trains of thought about the importance of neutral sentiments. Some take the stance that neutral sentiments are less important because they provide little information about a person's emotions towards a brand. For quick reads and overall summaries, this stance can sometimes be appropriate.

A different approach is more appropriate for a comprehensive research project where the impact of every single verbatim related to a brand fits into the marketing strategy. If someone expresses great fondness or great dislike, it is important. And, if someone expresses the purest form of neutrality, that too is important to know.

Let's consider a scenario with two hypothetical brands. If we look only at Top 2 Box scores, both brands achieve the same percentage of positive emotions. One might draw an initial conclusion that both brands are having the same impact on consumers.

Perceptions towards two brands	Brand A	Brand C
Top 2 Box (positive)	10%	10%
Neutral	80%	10%
Bottom 2 Box (negative)	10%	80%

But, clearly this isn't correct. We can easily see that 80% of people are indifferent to Brand A while only 10% of people are indifferent to Brand B. Similarly, only 10% of people dislike Brand A while 80% of people dislike Brand B.

Marketing strategies don't normally focus only on people who are already satisfied with, or loyal to, a brand. Unique strategies are commonly built in order to appeal to switchers and competitive users, in other words, people who scored in the neutral, and bottom boxes.

For instance, the Brand Manager for Brand A would need to understand why people only communicate about that brand in an indifferent manner. Does the product have very few unique features? Is it perceived as a commodity rather than a differentiated product?

On the other hand, the Brand Manager for Brand B would need to understand why people have such dislike towards their brand. Is it a competitive divide or is it simply a fixable feature?

In either case, the distribution of opinions, from positive to negative, will guide the development of an appropriate marketing strategy.

Conclusions

Know your purpose and know your research. This will help you decide how carefully you need to monitor neutrals. If you need fast results and general overall summaries, then binary results may work perfectly for you. For those who need in depth and comprehensive results, a categorical or continuous scale that includes neutrals will provide the precision required to develop well-rounded and actionable results.

About Conversition Strategies: Conversition Strategies is a boutique online market research firm based in the US (Conversition Strategies Limited) and Canada (Conversition Strategies Incorporated). Conversition listens to consumers by applying scientific principles to the collection and analysis of social media data. Its strength lies in combining the expertise of respected market researchers with social media mavens.

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