

The Social Media Garden: A 2.0 Organizational Research Study (February 2012)



What do you think are the main barriers for organizations in embracing social media practices and what ideas do you have for overcoming them? This is the question at the heart of a public research study being conducted by Silverman Research, which uses a social research methodology rather than a survey format to capture and develop collective insights on important questions. Everyone is able to view and evaluate the responses from others, in addition to contributing their own perspective.

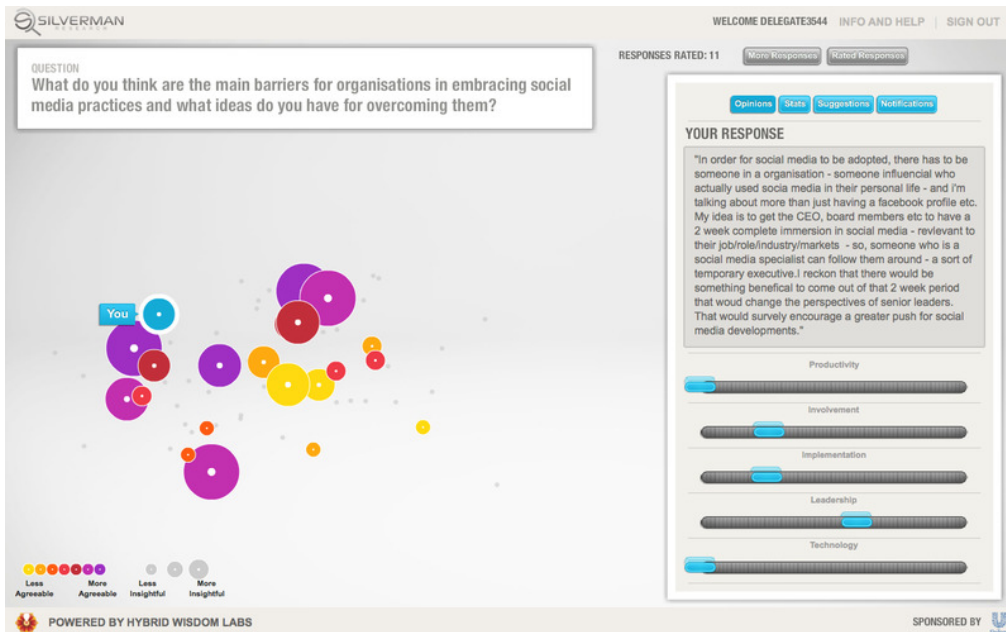
As the Founder of the Social Media in Organizations (SMinOrgs) Community, I am pleased to offer my support to this project. I learned about the study when Michael Silverman posted an invitation to participate in the SMinOrgs LI group. Obviously, the question is one that is near and dear to my heart, but I am also very impressed with and intrigued by his approach to building a dataset and representing the results.

I invite everyone to [enter the Garden](#), take a stroll through the responses shared by others, and plant a bloom of your own!

- Courtney Shelton Hunt, PhD

Study Overview/Invitation

The Social Media Garden is an open-access research project that has been designed to generate insight about the barriers organisations face in adopting social media practices – and solutions to overcome them. This new approach to online research eliminates unmanageable lists of comments and uses data visualizations to help participants navigate the conversation and develop their understanding. Algorithms then rapidly filter insightful comments based on input from other participants. Here's a screenshot of a typical page:



Of course, there is already a mounting body of research on the use of social media in organizations. However, none of these studies have been conducted using social media methodologies. When one considers the opportunities provided by social technologies to share information, develop ideas and generate insight, I find it immensely frustrating that so much social research is still conducted using surveys. For all the big consultancies, research agencies and academics espousing the benefits of social media, it's unfortunate that they have stuck to a standard survey approach. This is one the few research studies on social media in organizations to employ a social media approach. We therefore expect to produce many new insights that would not be possible using traditional survey approaches.

The study is being sponsored by Unilever to help push forward the social media agenda in organizations, and to build on their efforts to "social mediatize" employee research across the company (see below for more information on the methodology). The Garden will be open throughout February 2012 and has already received over 450 participants. A full report of the overall research findings will be publically available towards the end of March 2012. All participants will be emailed a copy of the report (containing a combined text, sentiment and statistical analysis), which will also be available on the Social Media Garden website. Please click [here](#) to enter the garden and plant your bloom.

A leaderboard of the top authors will be posted in the Garden towards the end of the project. Currently, the top author is 'philwoodford,' who wrote:

The two biggest factors preventing organisations embracing social media are: (1) Difficulty in measuring return on investment (2) Fear of loss of control Using social media successfully requires an investment of time and human resources. If organisations cannot see or quantify an immediate and obvious return, they get nervous. Social media is profoundly democratic. This takes power away from managers, marketers, HR professionals and others within the organisation that might be expected to sponsor its growth. Both of these factors will become less of an issue with each passing year, as social media becomes more and more embedded in the fabric of business and society as a whole. Business owners and managers who are resistant to change probably won't be convinced and there's little that can be done to shape their attitudes. The world will simply change around them.

Methodological Background

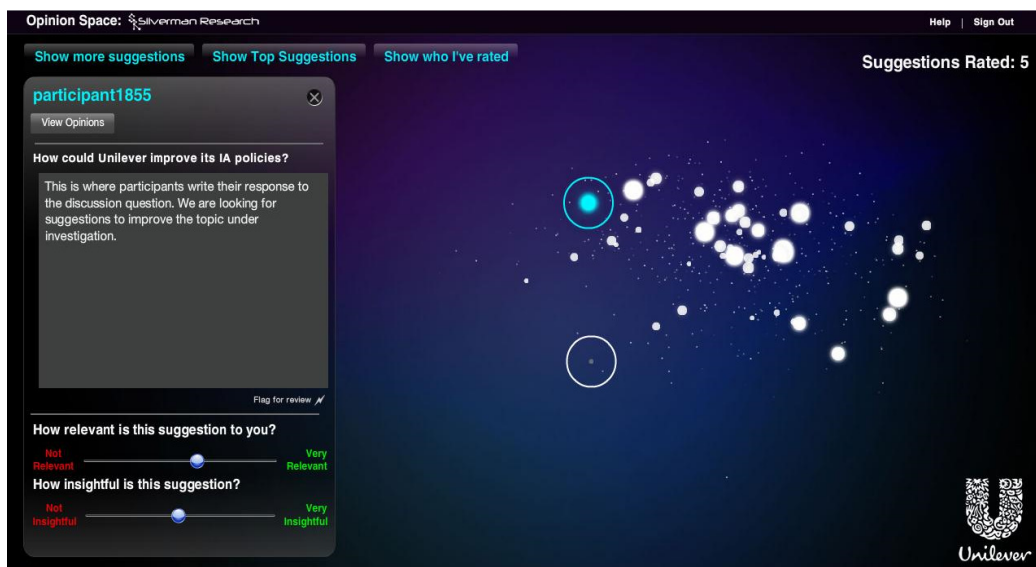
Despite their prevalence, surveys are riddled with problems. The most serious of which, and the one that is most often overlooked, is that they are incredibly boring for participants and consistently fail to provide participants with a compelling and engaging experience. The fact that participants complete surveys in isolation provides people with a very solitary experience. Worse still, a valuable opportunity is missed to capture the insight that comes from measuring what people think of other participants' comments. This is where surveys really fall down. If participants knew their comment would be available for others evaluate, they would not only be more likely to write a response, they would also be more likely to write a thoughtful and considered response.

In addition, if participants are able to evaluate others' comments, it becomes possible to identify the authentic voice of that community and see what themes are achieving consensus. Text analysis software is great, but we often forget that we have an even more powerful text analysis tool than any computer – the combined wisdom of our brains. I like to

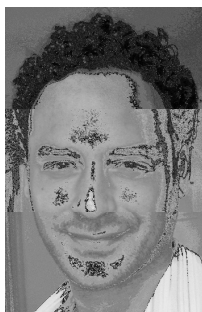
think of this as a form of crowd-sourced text analysis.

However, linear lists of comments that are used in traditional discussion forums and message boards are difficult to navigate and soon become unmanageable as the number of participants increases. This means that many comments never get read. Coupled with the widespread use of over-simplistic binary thumbs-up or five-star ratings, lists favor early birds or those with extreme views and conceal the real diversity of opinion.

Unilever was one of the first organizations to employ this approach internally, using a precursor to the Social Media Garden called “Opinion Space” (see screen shot below). This project engaged Unilever’s 1,800-strong international assignee employees in providing feedback and suggestions to improve its policies for this community. The project won two HR industry awards and has led to the adoption of this approach to employee research and collaboration in different parts of the business.



In addition to providing new insight into the use of social media in organizations, we also hope that the Social Media Garden will raise awareness of new ways of generating insight and facilitating mass collaboration.



Michael Silverman is Managing Director of Silverman Research, a company specializing in applying social media principles to social research. A psychologist and organizational research specialist, he was previously Global Head of Employee Research at Unilever.

For more information please contact:
michael.silverman@silvermanresearch.com