

Clemson Social Media Listening Center

in Partnership with Dell
and Powered by Radian6



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— Maribel Sierra, director of Social Media Services Group, Dell Inc.

In January 2011 when Clemson University’s Jim Bottum toured Dell’s Social Media Listening Command Center, he saw much more than the large monitors communicating real-time information. What he saw was opportunity.

Bottum, chief information officer and vice provost for Clemson Computing & Information Technology, is known for his entrepreneurial spirit and for identifying new opportunities and revenue streams in higher education. He had worked closely with Dell when Clemson purchased Dell’s Advanced Infrastructure Manager (AIM) software to increase the university’s computing power. As Bottum toured Dell’s command center, his mind began processing the possibilities.

How it works

Using keywords to target Dell-related content, operators of Dell’s command center can identify and “listen” to public conversations on social media platforms, from blogs to social networks to discussion forums. Conversations are displayed graphically, using movement and imagery to convey sentiment, share of voice, trend information and geo-location data. While Dell employs social media listening to enhance customer relations and marketing and business development initiatives, Bottum wondered how the technology could be applied in academia.

“What I saw in the command center was a company jumping on top of social media to gather business intelligence; I saw a company adapting to the new economic and market realities of our time,” Bottum says. “I knew I wanted to connect my faculty and students with that technology.”

When Bottum returned to Clemson and began talking about Dell’s command center, there was no shortage of enthusiasm. The faculty saw strong potential in social media listening as a research tool, and the command center promised to provide the organized infrastructure to do it. Eager to get the ball rolling, Bottum approached Dell about building a command center at Clemson. His timing could not have been more perfect, according to Maribel Sierra, director of Dell’s Social Media Services Group.

“At that time, we were looking for an ideal customer to test a lighthouse account for offering social media solutions, such as building social media listening command centers,” she says. “We were excited about doing a pilot with Clemson in particular, because we wanted to share our experience in the space and see what a command center could offer an entity outside the corporate world.”

Dell offered its expertise and consulting to build a command center at Clemson. Clemson is now exploring new uses for social media listening that Dell and other businesses could leverage in the future. This puts Clemson University at the forefront of a new technology frontier—a point not lost on Bottum.

“We are early, possibly the first, academic adopters of this technology and approach,” Bottum says.

Executing the plan

Bottum recruited Barbara Weaver, program manager of Clemson’s CyberInstitute, as the IT lead, and Jason Thatcher, an associate professor in Clemson’s Department of Management, as the academic lead. Dell brought in Radian6 to provide the software.

According to Sierra, all three players—Dell, Radian6 and Clemson—brought valuable perspectives to the table. Dell brought firsthand experience in operating a command center, Radian6 brought the software expertise, and Clemson opened the door to using social media listening within an academic environment.

In June 2011, Weaver and Thatcher traveled to Dell headquarters in Round Rock, Texas, to meet with Sierra and tour Dell’s command center. Two months later, renovations began at Sistine Hall on Clemson’s main campus. The university’s center would include a teaching area where faculty could hold social media classes and train people on using the center.

Constructing the center required collaboration among several stakeholders. Dell offered points to consider when planning the center’s layout, and numerous departments at Clemson provided input on their respective classroom needs. Chuck Heck, the university’s classroom design specialist, was able to put together a center that suited a wide range of users with feedback from Dell, Clemson Computing and Information Technology, the Clemson CyberInstitute, the College of Business and Behavioral Sciences, and the College of Architecture, Arts and Humanities.

Clemson, Radian6 and Dell spent much of the fall getting the software and hardware installed and running. In November, Thatcher conducted a test run with student researchers to resolve any last-minute bugs. Then, exactly one year from Bottum’s tour of Dell’s command center in January 2011, the Clemson Social Media Listening Center in Partnership with Dell and Powered by Radian6 opened its doors in time for the 2012 spring semester.



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Social media listening and Creative Inquiry

Weaver and Thatcher ultimately decided to incorporate social media listening into the university’s successful Creative Inquiry program. Established in 2005, nearly 2,000 Clemson students are involved in the university’s one-of-a-kind program, which offers undergraduate research experience in small-group settings under the guidance of faculty mentors. Through the program, students can earn credit for researching topics of their choosing. Creative Inquiry teams typically work together over the span of two to four semesters, and many have been asked to present their research findings to special interest groups outside the university.

With the center’s launch, Thatcher began mentoring two Creative Inquiry teams, consisting of students from multiple disciplines, including communications studies, psychology, computer science, engineering, graphics communications, business management and marketing.

According to Thatcher, he and the students discovered quickly that there is much to learn about using social media listening as a complementary tool to traditional research methods.

As he explains, students must create profiles to extract relevant conversations on the social web that aren’t hidden behind passwords or privacy settings. Building these profiles involves inputting keywords that define the topics, as well as those that don’t define the topic and should be excluded.

Adds Weaver: “Building these profiles takes some time to learn because you have to be thoughtful about the keywords you choose to ensure they are specific enough to attract relevant data. The process requires critical thinking, an important skill that Clemson students develop while learning to solve problems through their Creative Inquiry projects.”

Thatcher says that his students also are learning to look more closely at natural language processes in developing their profiles.

“We have had to learn how to build out profiles in the way that people really talk—for instance, using slang, nicknames and abbreviations,” he says. “A lot of social media listening is simply learning the language we use. We’ve had to really learn the voice that our population is talking in.”

Once the Creative Inquiry teams have captured target conversations, they can drill down into those conversations for further analysis. The listening center also allows student researchers to create alerts on specific subjects and to filter, sort and prioritize the incoming data. Data then can be exported to other programs, such as Microsoft Excel, for further analysis.

“Let’s say there’s a conversation around football,” Thatcher says. “What are they specifically talking about? Is it the players, the coaches, ticket sales? You can do that kind of analysis on any content area.”

Social media listening is teaching students how to work with “fuzzy” data and extract themes, Thatcher says.

“It’s forcing them to recognize (a) you can’t catch everything, (b) you can catch too much, and (c) you have to prioritize what you’re listening for,” he says.

According to Thatcher, when this kind of technology is put in students’ hands, “they go off and they innovate.” He relays the story of one student who is trying to predict the stock market through social media listening.

“He started building profiles around the conversations people were having on the social web about Dow Jones, and he says he’s already predicting with pretty good accuracy,” Thatcher says. “This kind of innovation and learning is not coerced; it just happens. The tools are intuitive, and the kids have grown up in this environment.”

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— Jason Thatcher, associate professor,
Department of Management, Clemson University

New technology, new ideas

In addition to Thatcher’s research teams, faculty members from Clemson’s communication studies department are offering a social media graduate course and mentoring a Creative Inquiry team in the listening center.

“As various faculty, staff, students and administrators on campus learn about the center, they very quickly begin talking about ideas that come to their minds,” Weaver says. “All of these ideas are interesting and even exciting. Some of the ideas are huge projects; some involve significant collaboration. All of them are important to someone. The depth and breadth of the center’s potential seem limitless.”

The business advantages of social media listening

In addition to conducting academic research, Clemson University is taking a page from Dell’s playbook and using Creative Inquiry teams to listen to what people have to say about the university—and engaging in those conversations when necessary.

Student researchers are “listening” to conversations in the following areas:

- Academics (admissions, research, classroom experience)
- Athletics (NCAA-sponsored events)
- Outreach (alumni activities and community programs, partnerships and services)
- Student activities (intramural sports, student groups, student life)

Says Thatcher: “The social media listening center has given us a new way to be introspective about our relationships with our stakeholders and the community at large.”

Engaging conversations

The listening center also has prompted first-time cross-departmental conversations and collaboration.



“In addition to connecting with university stakeholders, social media listening presents an opportunity to engage in new forms of research around online discourse that could impact information systems, psychology, computing, communications studies and many other disciplines,” Thatcher explains. “To make that happen, we’re writing grants that reflect the intersections of behavioral science, humanities, computing and business so that we can have more resources to study social-media-driven phenomenon.”

Thatcher and Weaver say that as more departments express interest in the center, they are discovering commonalities.

“We all struggle with understanding the same basic questions: How do you better organize information? How do you explain different outcomes in organizations? Why do people engage in different kinds of behavior?” Thatcher says. “When working with these very large data sets in somewhat nebulous online situations, you end up finding that we’re all tackling the same problems from different directions.”

Finding parallels in business and academia

In the process of building the university’s listening center, Dell and Clemson discovered several parallels in how social media listening can impact their organizations.

“Keeping the pulse of customers, stakeholders, competitors and industry is relevant to both academia and corporations,” Sierra says.

“Listening plays a huge role in business. Everyone is realizing how important listening is, and a command center provides an organized infrastructure around listening.”

— Maribel Sierra, director of Social Media Services Group, Dell Inc.

And, like Clemson University, Dell has found that its command center has triggered cross-departmental conversations. For instance, the employees who man Dell's command center routinely have to call upon subject-matter experts from various departments who can engage in identified online conversations about Dell products and solutions.

Also, both Clemson and Dell have been charged with developing infrastructure around their centers—such as policies, procedures, training and staffing—to make them fully operational.

"Having the data is not the destiny, but knowing how to interpret the data, what data to react to, who needs to react and when customer engagement is needed. That is what a command center needs to entail," Sierra says. "A solid social media strategy, policies and a training program are basic infrastructure elements that need to be in place."

Looking to the future

In the short term, Thatcher sees social media listening becoming a part of the management and communications studies curricula, but he predicts that it will factor into the lesson plans of other disciplines down the road.

"It's really going to take an ecosystem of researchers and classes to optimize the value of social media listening for our students," he says.

Ever the visionary, Bottum says the next step is to think about how the university can create new values for the center. He likens the university's listening center to a "watering hole for interdisciplinary research," which opens the door to new frontiers. Having such a commodity certainly will benefit Clemson University in the marketplace.

"In academia, what are we all competing for?" he asks. "The best and the brightest. This center can give us a leg up. It's unexplored space."

Thatcher envisions rich partnerships between Clemson and other industries to study the power and application of social media listening in business, academia, nonprofit and all types of entities. For instance, what is the human psychology behind social media interactions and strategies? Why do some social media strategies work and others do not? Clemson can research these topics and provide hard data.

Both Sierra and Bottum say the pilot project has proven a win-win.

"Listening plays a huge role in business," Sierra says. "Everyone is realizing how important listening is, and a command center provides an organized infrastructure around listening."

"I think we've each bent and pushed each other in the process of making this project stand up," Bottum says. "This entire project has been a public-private collaboration. My personal feeling is that's what we need for this country to get back on its feet again."

"What we've done with Dell is put together something that required us to not just talk about kicking down walls, but to really get inside each other's operations and learn what each other does. We're not taking our eyes off our respective missions, but we're figuring out how to advance each other. That's a real partnership, and I think more of them will stem from this."

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