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## Tapping Into Customers' Online Chatter

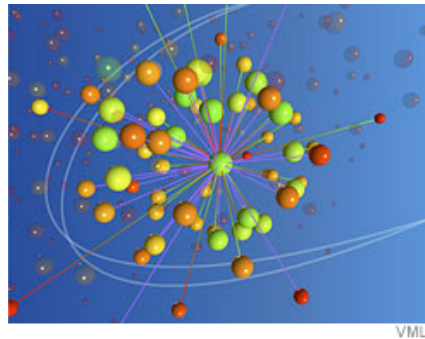
### New Tools Will Track Critics, Fans on Blogs; The 'Seer' Trolls Web

By AARON O. PATRICK  
 May 18, 2007; Page B3

LONDON -- A few weeks after sportswear maker [Adidas](#) starting selling the Predator, a new soccer sneaker, in Europe last year, a few customers noticed the colors of the shoe leather were quickly fading.

Adidas knew about the problem almost right away, thanks to Seer.

Seer is a computer program used by digital agency VML that trolls Internet blogs to see what people are saying about its clients. VML, a unit of WPP Group's Young & Rubicam Brands, informed the German sportswear maker that people were complaining about the leather. Adidas then began telling customers to treat the shoes' leather before wearing them, VML says.



Digital agency VML tries to help clients visualize how their products or services are being bandied about in Internet postings. In this hypothetical example, a client's own site inside MySpace is represented by the sphere at the center. The other spheres represent blogs or other sites that have links to it, as tracked by VML's Seer technology. Bigger spheres are more influential.

VML, based in Kansas City, Missouri, developed Seer to identify influential bloggers. Monitoring thousands of Web sites for key phrases, Seer tracks how criticism or praise of a company spreads from one blog site to others. It displays the information on a three-dimensional map, with Web pages represented by spheres, which get bigger as the number of relevant posts on them increases. VML found the complaints about the Predator shoe through Seer and told Adidas's marketing

department.

Marketers and researchers are catching on quickly to the power of the blogosphere, and trying different ways to use that power to their advantage. In April, ratings company Nielsen said it would buy the 42% it doesn't own of New York-based BuzzMetrics, which alerts companies whenever individuals write about them on the Internet.

BuzzMetrics has been helping pharmaceutical companies monitor Web postings about new drugs being worked on by competitors, says a spokesman. The company plans to open a London office soon.

This month, a small Seattle company called Visible Technologies began selling a computer program to help companies reply to criticism on blogs. The software records everything a company's

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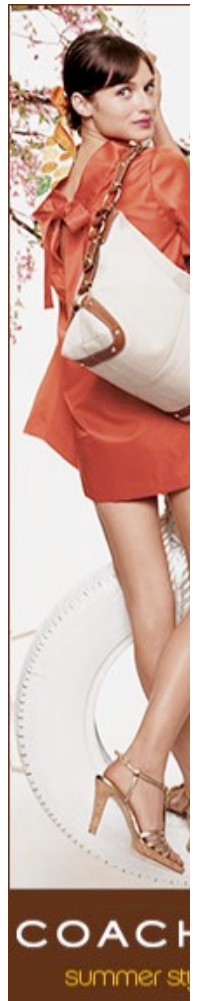
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public-relations department or advertising agency says online, making it available for in-house lawyers to monitor. WPP invested in Visible Technologies last year.

Phone company [Sprint Nextel](#) recently gave several hundred bloggers six months' free use of a Samsung cellphone with a built-in video camera. VML determined which bloggers were the most influential and should receive phones. The objective was to get feedback on how to improve Sprint's phone service and promote positive discussion in blogs, says a Sprint spokeswoman.

"The phone is awesome," says Joseph Jaffe, a marketing consultant who has been enthusiastically blogging about his phone since it arrived last month. "Sprint has certainly got their value out of me and then some."

Blogs and other messages posted on the Internet by individuals are becoming an increasingly popular way for people to share information about products, offering companies a trove of consumer feedback they previously could get only through expensive and slow surveys. About 1.4 million Internet messages were posted each day in March, up from 600,000 a day two years previously, according to Technorati, an Internet search engine for finding blogs.

That is driving agencies that mine Internet posts for customer information and enlist blogs in marketing campaigns to develop innovative new products.

"By listening to what people are saying online, we are getting an understanding of what people really think," says Gard Gibson, a VML partner. "The moment you ask someone for their opinion I have created a bias because of the natural human instinct to please."

VML plans to release a version of Seer later this year that searches posts written in Chinese and Hindi.

Appealing to bloggers, though, can backfire. Late last year, [Microsoft](#) was criticized in the tech community for giving technology bloggers free computers to promote its new Vista operating system. "Microsoft Bribing Bloggers with Laptops," reported a tech Web site, Slashdot. Microsoft's public-relations company, Edelman, says it sent the computers and didn't expect favorable coverage in return.

Write to Aaron O. Patrick at [aaron.patrick@wsj.com](mailto:aaron.patrick@wsj.com)

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