Marketing Research Snapshot: Why Some Songs Become Hits

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What is your image of a Wharton School professor? Hours spent in front of collegiate classrooms teaching finance to Wall Street-bound students?

That's only part of the story. While Wharton began as a finance school, it has grown in many ways. Wharton has 12 academic departments and 250 faculty members who specialize in all areas of business, from advertising and entrepreneurship, to wage inequality and zoning regulations.

What's more, Wharton professors don't spend all their time in the classroom. They instead conduct hours of research and produce knowledge for other faculty around the world to teach to their students. That knowledge also helps improve the way businesses operate and people live in society.

Combine that broad business focus (well beyond finance) and a passion for experimentation and observation, and you're bound to get some unique and powerful business-related intel. Recent published research by Wharton's Jonah Berger definitely qualifies.

Dr. Jonah Berger studies behavioral insights from text.

Dr. Berger, an associate professor of marketing, is an expert in studying and communicating how products, behaviors and ideas catch on. Questions he researches include: Why do some products catch on and become popular while others fail? Why do apps and services take off while others languish? And why do certain ads, messages, or ideas stick in memory, while others disappear the minute you hear them?

His latest paper, "[Thinking of You: How Second-person Pronouns Shape Cultural Success](#)," reveals information that could help marketers craft more enticing messages in advertising and other customer outreach. It's part of a larger study into how precise language affects consumer behavior, with implications for marketing, sales and customer service.

With the help of our sister publication *Knowledge@Wharton*, here are 7 insights from Dr. Berger's research, which he conducted with Grant Packard, marketing professor at York University's Schulich School of Business. Listen to the [full podcast](#) for more of their "wisdom from words."

1. Understanding Jonah Berger's research begins with natural language processing, which means to extract insights about how people behave from textual data (the words). He explains it like this: "Everything we do — from this interview we're recording, conversations we have with friends and family members, reviews we leave online, customer services calls, songs we listen to, articles we read — contains language. There's a really exciting opportunity now to mine some of this data for behavioral insight to understand why songs or movies succeed, to understand why some customer service calls go better than others, and to use language to be more effective."

2. Berger and Packard's research started with a simple question: Why do some songs become hits?

3. Their hypothesis: The success of a lot of popular songs boils down to one simple word: the pronoun "you." "Songs use this word often," said Berger. "Think about Whitney Houston's famous song, "I Will Always Love You." Think about Queen's "We Will Rock You." What we saw in preliminary analysis was the word "you" seemed to be linked to success. Songs that said "you" more often…seemed to be more successful. We started wondering, why might that be?"

4. The process of studying and experimenting helped Berger arrive at informed conclusions. "We started doing different analyses to try to figure it out. For example, we started with a data set of around 2,000 songs over three years," said Berger. "We went to the Billboard charts, scraped what songs were popular in different years and controlled for a variety of things like radio airplay, genre, artists and the content. We found that songs with more "you" were more successful…then we also did some experiments. We asked a number of people in an experiment, 'Think about a song that you've heard recently, and think about how much you like that song.' Then we went ahead and grabbed the lyrics to those songs and counted the number of "you's" that appeared…What's neat about work like this is, we're not sitting there manually counting the number of you's. We're using natural language processing, automated textual analysis, to count it for us. We use scripts that run through the data."

5. The research revealed that songs with the word "you" weren't necessarily successful because they made us feel good inside, as if the singer was speaking directly to us. Instead, "when we hear a song like "I Will Always Love You"…we think about someone in our own life that we feel that way toward," explained Berger. "I think this is quite interesting because this gets to the core of why we like cultural products…They help us see our own relationships, our own social connections, as deeper and different as they might be otherwise."

6. The word "you" can drive action, concluded Berger. If I'm a songwriter, the number of "you's" may impact whether or not my song is successful. If I'm a music producer thinking about investing in a particular artist, this might be useful to understand. Beyond the music industry, I think this has a lot of interesting implications. There's other work showing that the word "you" can increase attention… You often see a lot of second-person pronouns used in very successful online content because it encourages us to pay attention.

7. Led by academic research, the business world is catching on to the wisdom of words. "Many companies now are doing some version of what we call social listening — listening to the chatter on social media about products and brands and services, and mining that for insight," noted Berger. "I think this [research] opens up a lot of avenues to study language and cultural items.