Episode 157: Liz Gross and Amber Sandall

# KL: Katie Linder

# LC: Liz Gross

**AS:** Amber Sandall

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and fifty-seven.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

**KL:** In this episode, I'm joined by two guests:

Dr. Liz Gross is a data-driven researcher and scholar who specializes in creating entrepreneurial social media strategies in higher education. Her professional superpower is to embolden colleges and universities and help them launch modern market research strategies using social listening. Teaching is Liz's passion, and she brings that to colleges and universities as the founder and CEO of Campus Sonar, a specialized social listening agency that matches high value social media intelligence and engagement opportunities to organizational strategic initiatives.

Amber Sandall is Campus Sonar’s research manager. She brings expertise in marketing communications research and data analysis and reporting to her role of managing campus sonars social listening research program and operations. With both agency and higher education experience, she enjoys unearthing actionable insights to help colleges and universities Drive growth when she's not writing Boolean queries, Amber enjoys a good taco and a new book.

Liz, Amber, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

**LG:** Happy to be here.

**AS:** Yeah!

**KL:** Okay. So I want to dive into this concept of social listening so that we can learn a little bit more about this Liz. Can you tell us a little bit about what is social listening? How would you define it?

**LG:** Absolutely. So there is a lot of public online conversations that can be of interest to individuals and organizations, and social listening is finding that conversation and making use of it. So if you think about all of the public online conversations from Twitter, Instagram, blogs news, forums, And finding that conversation essentially transcribing categorizing and analyzing it in a way that makes sense to answer research questions, that is what we mean when we talk about social listening.

KL: Okay. So Amber what are some of the goals of social listening like why might you want to engage in something like this and maybe who are the people who would want to engage in this?

AS: Yeah, there are a variety, I think, of different business reasons why people might want to engage in social listening. I think to kind of flip that question on its head social listening itself is a tactic. So for people, organizations to think about socialist me that really goes back to that idea of research questions that Liz brought out. So if you have a research question that you want to ask the internet might be the right place to turn. People are more likely to go online and share how they really feel about something. So to kind of dig into companies and organizations that might be interested in that you're talking about brands. They might want to go out and understand how people online think about them and their reputation and how they're perceived. You are talking about maybe product marketing teams going out and gathering information on user experience, on how people like or dislike their product in particular, and for Campus Sonar you're specifically talking to higher education institutions who are interested in a number of their audiences and what they're saying online as well. So taking that research as a whole—kind of the goal—can vary by Institution for what they are trying to do, but generally it is gathering information to make decisions for your business or for your organizations that are informed and based on some level of research and analysis.

**KL:** Okay, so as I'm hearing you both describe this it sounds very qualitative to me in terms of like trying to find patterns or do some coding. Once you start to find the data, you know that your or collect the data that you're starting to look at. Can you talk a little bit about the research skills that are involved in Social listening? I would imagine some of its qualitative but there's probably other things in there as well. What are some of the things that are involved?

**AS:** Yeah, Katie, you hit the nail on the head. It is definitely a qualitative in nature. I found as an analyst and as a researcher, and for some of the folks on my team, that some of the skills that are really transferable to conducting social listening are having a strong sense of language skills. So thinking about how one person might talk about a topic and then transferring that to how a variety of people might talk about that. So definitely strong language skills as well as really strong logic skills. So when we are writing a query or if someone is conducting social listening, how to logically conduct that search and write that search is really important as well. I would say, I think to your points of qualitative analysis, really being able to take a high-level view of your data and identify patterns, trends, what is there as well as what isn't there. So kind of having that critical eye when you're conducting your social listening as well.

The last thing I think I would add to that in terms of research skills is that it is managing social listening as a research project. So an analyst would be going in and identifying not only those research questions that we had talked about before but the best way to go about doing that. So how and where and which platforms online are you gathering data from? How are you sampling that data? How are you collecting that data? And all of that adds up to your final data sets. And then that analysis where you're doing a lot of that qualitative work to look into trends as well.

**LG:** One thing I would add and I think where people realize how in-depth and customize this work can get is the idea of coding or building a taxonomy that makes sense for the data that we gather. So a social listening research project could have anywhere from hundreds to millions of mentions that are being analyzed, and the software that is often used as social listening can only do so much based on an algorithm. It'll try to do sentiment, it'll try to point out some different trends and in volume or timing or usually geography. But particularly, for the work that we do, it's all about building some sort of a coding system based on a taxonomy that was aligned with the research question. So we need to build a structure into that social data that makes sense for the project itself and then that coding it can be rules-based and automated and continue on in real time automatically, but creating that structure is something that absolutely requires a research skill and isn't something that you can just push a button and a software tool to make happen.

**KL:** So I'm really curious when you're first getting started with a social listening project, to what degree is the project kind of structured going in, like you keep kind of mentioning these research questions, but I would imagine you might have some situations where it's quite exploratory. Like you're not sure what is going to come out of it. Can you talk a little bit about those two different models where you might come in with a very structured research question versus one where maybe you're not quite sure what you're going to find?

**LG:** Absolutely could. I will talk about a structured one as I know Amber's working on quite a few exploratory projects right now, but one example for structure might be if we're working with Sam marketing focus clients, they want to understand the general reputation of conversations about their brand and potentially how it aligns with the brand they've been trying to build. So in that case, it's quite strong. And in that we will make sure we write a query that captures the mentions that matter look at all of those mentions and then identify the language patterns that can help us map real human conversations to these potentially lofty brand goals that a brand or an organization might have. And then it really is simply how do we sort based on those and crosstab and analyze and look at some correlations to answer very specific questions such as how much of the conversation is branded? What brand attributes tend to overlap with each other? Where online do we find conversations aligned with certain brand attributes? For a project like that, we can write a research brief and pretty much know how we're going to do the work, but I know Amber's team is exploring a bunch of other things that really kind of start from an idea and move forward.

**AS:** So from my perspective, when I think about unstructured research projects, we will often come to the table with that idea that Liz was speaking about and it's kind of its kind of a seed where we might have more of a hypothesis in reality. And we want to say can we construct research projects where we can explore this? Can we confirm our hypothesis or will we find information that is doesn't support it? So an example of that I think would be thinking about a particular audience, right? So if you are trying to target or understand or work with a particular audience say Millennials—everyone talks about Millennials these days—and if you want to know what people ages 16 through 25 think about. . . what's a good topic?

**LG:** Meal delivery.

**AS:** Meal delivery services. Thank you, Liz. We would be able to go online and just kind of explore around that and try to answer that question and see what patterns emerge from the data set that catch our eye. So I think in terms of the unstructured approach, we have a good sense of how the project will work overall. But really when we get into that data set, it's a little bit like I imagine someone running through the field and just kind of picking flowers, and that's honestly what a lot of my analysts would say the experience is like because it's just so fun to get into that data set and see what emerges from there to try to answer that very broad question.

**KL:** Okay, so I'm gonna want to go way deeper into this because it's a really interesting. We're going to take a brief break and when we come back, we're going to hear a little bit more from Liz and Amber about the research that they're conducting through social listening back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Liz, Amber I'm wondering if you can give us a specific example of a research project that you have more recently completed, or that you're currently engaged with through Campus Sonar and what were the research questions, or if the question that you started out with when you first started diving into social listening around that project.

**LG:** Sure. Well, I would actually like to talk about the first project we ever did for Campus Sonar, which was in support of our parent company, which is an education, higher education philanthropic organization and they wanted to know a little bit more about the barriers to student success why students start school and then leave without completing a degree or credential and it originally approached that project from a very traditional research standpoint. So I was leading a market research team that interviewed a few dozen college success professionals both on and off campus. And we started gathering some really clear themes, actually 16 themes, as to why students were not completing their degree or their credential. And we were getting towards the end of that project while we were developing Campus Sonar as a social listening research agency, and I looked at that data and I thought, “Wow, the student voice is 100% absent from everything we're doing here,” which is not exactly how I want to represent research about student success, but it was not feasible from a time or access or financial standpoint to actually go talk to students for that study. So Amber had just become an analyst at that point in time and I kind of asked her, “What do you think you could find through social listening about how students drop or how students talk about dropping out of college or leaving school?” And I let her run for that at that point.

**AS:** Yeah! So it's a really broad question and I kind of looked at Liz and I said, “Okay, I will try to figure that out.” For I think my first step, it really was sitting down and trying to conceive of other ways that students could talk about dropping out of school. So Liz us hit on a couple of those. So if someone might say, “I'm dropping out, I'm thinking of leaving school” and I built on that list in terms of “I'm not going to finish, I'm, my schooling is incomplete,” for example, and with that list that I built I was able to write a query, or a search, so that I could identify those conversations online. So what that returned was a very large data set of information from blogs, Twitter, Instagram, some new sources as well, in terms of why people are talking about dropping out of school, dropping out of University, dropping out of college. With that, the next step was really going through and making sure that the query that I wrote that that search returned a relevant data set. So sometimes with new sources, for example, using that language and saying, “Okay, I want to return every single news source that uses the phrase ‘dropping out’” didn't return a mention to me that was about a student who had dropped out. So that was really important for me as a researcher and as an analyst to go through and validate the data that my query had returned. After that, it was onto my favorite part of the research projects in terms of that analysis. And Liz had touched on this earlier in terms of coding and creating a taxonomy and I took a kind of 10,000 foot view of my data set and I said, “Alright. What is sticking out to me here?” And there were I think five or six teams when I when I started looking through social media mentions as to why students kept talking about leaving school, and dropping out, and not finishing their degree. So that was exciting to start to notice those, but an aspect of the research itself is actually kind of testing that hypothesis, so noticing is one thing and so the next step for me was going through and creating a way to automatically segment the data that I had collected. So we use rules with the software that we use and I was able to write kind of another another search at that point to say, “Okay, I've noticed students talk about what I was calling and unsustainable lifestyle.” So they would talk about the effects of drinking, sometimes drugs, other lifestyle choices that they would make that caused them to be not successful and their schoolwork. So that point I kind of repeated my initial process in terms of thinking about what kind of language students would use around that, and I had a good set of ideas from that pattern that I had already noticed. So I built a rule to automate, automatically segments my conversations and then, in doing so, I was able to compare that the different reasons themselves. So I ended up with I think those five or six different categories and once I had everything categorized in my data set then came that true analysis portion where I was able to look at volume in each category for my time period, look at volume overtime segments, and maybe by the time of the year, or monthly weekly, etc., and start to really put my observations into good context for my final analysis of the piece so I can continue talking about that but I can see that Liz is nodding her head and she might have some thoughts to add here as well.

**LG:** I think what was really interesting about Amber's analysis was that she found—we ended up using five reasons from from your themes, and three of those reasons overlapped with what we found from the traditional research and that made a lot of sense—but the two that did not were that unsustainable lifestyle and then what students were saying as a dislike of school, but once you dove into the actual mentions, which is a really great feature of social listening is you have these high level themes, but there are real human stories behind every single one. When you dive into those themes of dislike for school, it was actually students talking about a bad college fit. So we matched Amber’s social listening insights into our traditional-based research and that actually changed the recommendations of what we should be looking at in terms of potential interventions that would improve student success and actually resulted in more of a focus on the idea of the hidden curriculum and what people understand about college going in, how they develop college knowledge, and also how they navigate potential obstacles, like drug and alcohol abuse, as a way to contribute to successful completions of degrees and credentials and that's nowhere where we would have gotten if we based our work on the very traditional interview methods. And I can't imagine what it would have been like for any researcher to try and gather what I think was 800,000 mentions that you worked with through any other any other method other than social listening.

**KL:** So I'm sure some of the people who are listening to this are thinking how long does this take? You know because they especially qualitative researchers know, you know coding can take an incredibly long amount of time. Can you talk a little bit about that and just especially the scale that you just mentioned the amount of mentions? How long does it take to go through this process and, Amber, you gave such a nice breakdown of you do it once, but then you might do it again based on what you're finding.

**AS:** I think you hit again the nail on the head, Katie, and that sometimes stuff comes up that you didn't expect and that's always a surprise, but I would say more of more often than not it's a pleasant surprise because it means that you are on the right track and you're finding things that will better inform your final analysis. In terms of the actual time for a project, I think it does go back to the volume of online mentions that are returned and I think as a whole like if you're conducting social listening research, you have to make some choices up front in terms of how you validate the data ahead of time. Is it something where you want to sample a percentage of the data returned in kind of do a QA of that and then move forward? Which is a choice that that fits and I think it does vary based on the research projects, the research goals, and then the questions that you're trying to answer. A more concrete answer that you could be looking for is for a typical project, at least that I've worked on, it could from start to finish from getting those research questions to the final reports be as quickly as a month. I think longer projects with larger volumes of conversation with may be more complex research questions could take up to probably six to eight months because of the things that you had called out where we are building a taxonomy and a coding structure and validating perhaps large amounts of data, and that all kind of adds to that timeline as well.

**LG:** If I remember correctly. This particular project was less than six weeks of your part-time attention.

**AS:** Yeah.

**KL:** Wow, okay. Well unloving digging into these details. We're going to take another brief break when we come back. We'll hear more from Liz and Amber about some of the other projects that they've been working on back in a moment.

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# Segment 3:

**KL:** Amber, If I'm wondering if you can share a little bit more about the most frequent data sets and the methodologies that you're using to engage in the social listening research.

**AS:** Sure, so. I think there's kind of two really big ways that someone can go about conducting social listening. One, that isn't always known as actually that if you go out to Twitter right now, you can do a version of social listening yourself for free. Twitter.com. So that is very exciting. You can use the advanced Twitter search and if you know Boolean operators, you can actually put those right into the Twitter bar on top and see what authors and what mentions are returned to you right in Twitter itself. So that is one way you can conduct social listening.

The other which we use at Campus Sonar is we actually leverage an enterprise-level social listening software called Brandwatch. So that helps us gather a lot, excuse me, a higher volume of online mentions and it also lets us a kind of enhance the net that we cast online to grab those mentions. In terms of enterprise-level social listening software, there's actually a couple things that we keep in mind when we’re gathering our data. The first is that we really only can collect publicly available information. So the websites and the platforms themselves that are online often limit which information can be collected by social listening programs. So Facebook, for example, is pretty locked down in terms of privacy, and they don't often let even publicly available information. If you have a Facebook profile out to social listening and soft. Twitter, on the other hand, if your account is public and your tweets are public, and if your settings are adjusted this way, Twitter can collect your tweets and I can collect those if they are relevant to my social listening research project.

So that brings me think to the second point in terms of collecting data sets and that is the social listening industry in general, the tools that we use are sometimes limited and how they collect information. Just even if you think about how often websites are updated or how often content is published, and social media sites, sometimes there's just a difference between how quickly those platforms, and for example, can pick up that data and return them to you to answer your question. So we think about a lot of stuff like that when we build our research projects to make sure that we account for things like, how does our sample ultimately look knowing that we're collecting from platforms A and B and C, but we might have limited coverage on another one.

And of course the third thing that we think about when we are building our data sets is that people, people themselves. So when they post on social media sites, sometimes their accounts are completely private. LinkedIn, for example, doesn't allow social listening to occur on their platform and the people on there also have privacy concerns. So we as social listeners try to make sure that we account for that and think about the people the types of people who are posting publicly online. So all of that returns a pretty robust data sets still from places like Twitter, general news sites, blogs, forums, and we really do cover quite a lot more than just social media sites.

**KL:** Okay. So before we dive into one more example of the work that you all are doing. Liz. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about the structure of your organization and your research teams in terms of how many people work on these projects and how they're distributed.

**LG:** Certainly. We are a lean mean, almost like a start-up, machine. Our research team currently has three analysts and Amber as a research manager, and I'm most, many analysts can work independently to do the work that they are trying to achieve although sometimes. In our larger data sets, or larger industry driven reports, we will pair up an analyst, so they tend to be a bit of a jack-of-all-trades. Although ours are all Julie's of all trades, and they have a large variety of skill sets to work and what they're doing. What really is important in the work that we do is the integration of somebody that understands a lot about the business need for the client that we're working with. So since we work with higher education, that is somebody that understands when an admissions or advancement, or university relations office might be trying to achieve so that they can give the right context and background to the analyst to help them understand what sort of information they might encounter and help them get a more relevant, yet also as broad as possible, data set. So I mean, Amber might be able to speak to this a little bit more, but a lot of the work we do the work itself tends to be independent. The way we develop our research methodology and approach is fairly collaborative because we are often developing and inventing those methods as we go, which is something that makes our work so exciting because there is not, there are, there's no class that I'm aware of to teach you how to do social listening data analysis, unless you take it from a vendor. and we're often surprising the software vendors with how we analyze data. So the collaboration comes with figuring out an approach and then the actual analysis can be pretty individually driven.

**AS:** Yeah, I really agree with that. I think one of the biggest challenges that we face as analysts, or opportunities reall,y is that things are things are always changing. So one day we might wake up and Twitter's change something on their platform or our software provider has changed something on their end. And then so it kind of causes us to reevaluate day-to-day and think about how we want to approach things. So I appreciate it. I think it keeps me on my toes and my team always thinking about how things are working now and how we can improve them and what changes we might anticipate and how we can continually approve, improve our methods for the future.

**KL:** All right. Well, I'm wondering if we can end with one more example of the kinds of research projects that you're engaging with through Campus Sonar.

**LG:** I would love to talk about our online conversation benchmarking project for higher education. So this is really a labor of love that we're doing for the higher ed community. It is not a project that we did for any particular client, but we're recognizing that this is a new form of research that many both faculty and practitioners are not very familiar with. So Amber and her team looked at 65 institutions developing a representative sample attempting to recreate a sample based on institution size, educational focus, and even geographic location within the United States. And then looked backwards, which is another nice thing about social listening. You don't have to look at live conversation. You can look at historical conversation. We looked at one year of online conversation about those campuses at a pretty basic level because we were at 65 of them, and that research is actually getting released this month in February, and it will be the first of its kind to help campuses understand not only how many people talk about them and where, but how their influence on the conversation affects their reputation, and volume of conversation through an analysis of our owned and earned conversation. So, I like conversation published by the campus versus other people saying things about the campus. We got to really play around with some of our more interesting taxonomy. So Amber's team has developed a coding mechanism to automatically segment athletics and non-athletics conversation about a college campus so we can see what happens when you take athletics out and you put it back in. And we can also look at conversation about students who are considering applying, so the prospective student as well as those who are admitted and enrolled. And then on the opposite end alumni and see how that conversation compares between institution types and sizes and we found some really interesting things. One being that athletics conversation really seems to level the playing field regardless of how good that athletics team is. Most campuses, even if their teams are terrible, well over half their conversation coming from if they have an athletics team. We also learned some really interesting things about prospective students, so we can use social listening for these high-level insights that we've talked about, but it also can be a really tactical thing for marketers or recruiters that want to find individual mentions of a student or an alumnus to engage with and we've always wanted to find the mentions of people thinking about applying to college, right? That's a recruiters dream. And what the research has found so far is that students are much more likely to talk about their experience as an applicant online once they've been admitted somewhere. Which if you you think about that, makes a lot of sense. They feel like they have a little bit more safety at that point. But then that opens up a really interesting opportunity during the yield cycle for an admissions team to help students feel needed and wanted and accepted. So there's a variety of other research that is going to be coming out of that benchmarking report. But it'll be available on our website at campussonar.com free to download and I do have to say the thing I'm most proud of this report that I'm talking about that Amber completely did is the methodology section. So we really broke down how Amber and her team approached the research, how we coded the data, how we did sampling, limitations and delimitations, because we do consider this a research method and although we work as an agency. We wanted to make sure that method was really well represented to anyone reading that report.

**KL:** Well we will definitely link to this in the show notes when it's available so that people can take a look, and this is just it's fascinating work. I want to thank you, Liz and Amber, so much for taking the time to come on the show and share a little bit more about your experiences with social listening. Thanks so much.

**LG:** Thanks for having us.

**AS:** Thanks Katie.

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week's episode of “Research in Action.” I'm Katie Linder and we'll be back next week with a new episode.

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