



# sales pitch society

how advertisers get us to do their dirty work

by Kate Kaye

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## Introduction

In recent times, we've heard a lot about the ill-effects of advertising. It's commandeered our public spaces in the forms of corporate naming rights, towering billboards and sidewalk stencils. Nearly all forms of media and entertainment, from television sitcoms to news programming to novels have increasingly integrated advertising into content. Even our schools have been infiltrated by advertising. However, there are places in which we may have neglected to recognize the presence of advertising: ourselves.

This isn't an alarmist sermon. It's just a heads up. You see, more and more, advertisers are counting on you and those around you to do their dirty work for them. In fact, sometimes their marketing campaigns hinge upon your willing participation in the promotion of their products. Like billboards, TV commercial breaks, phone booths and subway cars, the words we speak, the actions we take and the choices we make have become the latest spaces in which to place ads. No longer will our logo-emblazoned clothing suffice. Now advertisers want what's underneath it to promote their wares as well.

Some human media buys willfully choose to be used in such a way by advertisers and marketers. They offer themselves up to the highest bidder, begging to have their personal, everyday conversations tainted with promo pitches. Some take part unwittingly, gaining little compensation for pushing products and services to others. Some go undercover, promoting brands to friends and acquaintances without letting on that they're getting paid to do so. Forget the Tupperware parties, forget your Amway-hawking coworker, forget the guy who wanted to sell his kid's name to some corporation: the new human ad phenomenon takes word-of-mouth marketing and product endorsement to a whole new level.

We have no crystal ball to show us what sorts of effects this phenomenon will have on relationships among individuals and on society as a whole. If we did, there's no doubt it would run a few 30-second spots before playing the foreboding footage. Certainly, if this person-to-person marketing trend persists, it will have an impact, and chances are it won't be a good one. From the looks of things, we're already becoming a sales pitch society.

## The Word of the Whored

Consider these enthusiastic campaign crusaders. Chris and Luke have promised to spread their message far and wide. They've got no intentions of preaching the usual peace, love, do unto others type stuff, however. Nope, these teenage toadies aim to sermonize on the marketing mount. Their pulpit: the college campus. The golden calf they'll ride in on: the sponsor with the best offer.

Just before entering their senior years at New Jersey's Haddonfield High, on August 18, 2000, Chris Barrett and Luke McCabe announced their mission to become the first corporately sponsored college students.

An amateurish website, *ChrisAndLuke.com*, indicated that these kids were as serious as they were shameless. "WANTED: Sponsors For Our College Education," exclaimed the homepage. "We will drink your soda and eat your chips.... We will eat your cereal even if we're not hungry."

Photographed in matching khaki cargo shorts and white T-shirts, they resembled average, everyday, carefree high school senior clones. Their broad smiles revealed gleaming pearly whites, but there was an off-putting, possessed look in their eyes. It must have come from gorging themselves on all those extra bowls of Fausted Flakes.

According to a press release distributed by their publicist, Karen Lauren Ammond of KBC Media Relations, they vowed to do just about anything in exchange for tuition payments. They would "drape their bodies, cars and dorms with corporate logos.... [and] promote and represent any products that are geared towards college age students...."

A site slide show presented a multitude of ad placement options, from T-shirt to surfboard branding. That's not all. One image displayed a possible scenario during which Chris and Luke required auto-repair services: "I guess we will have to use our \_\_\_\_ phone to call the \_\_\_\_ auto assistance hotline," read the caption. Essentially, they had taken product placement to a whole new level by suggesting its integration into their daily, and very real lives and conversations.

Within no time, they had reached people across the globe, through coverage in *People Magazine*, *The LA Times*, *The NY Times*, *The New York Post*, *USA Today*, *The London Times*, ABC, Fox News, BBC Asia/Europe and National Public Radio. The "Spokesguys," as they referred to themselves, claimed to have done over 400 radio interviews.

Chris and Luke even compared themselves to sponsored golf prodigy, Tiger Woods. "Tiger has sponsors for playing golf. We need sponsors to go to college."

The spokesguys represent the Reality TV mentality gone awry. Not only do more and more everyday people strive for that cherished fifteen minutes, whether it be the result of an appearance on 'The Jerry Springer Show' or a school shooting; celebrity status is slowly becoming perceived as an inalienable right. Or, in this case, the fringe benefits of fame are considered to be warranted, despite a likely lack of talent and ability.

Celebrity spokes-folks like Tiger Woods, Britney Spears and Michael Jordan have been awarded lucrative sponsorship deals because they receive an abundance of media coverage and are often recognized the world over. In other words, the sponsor's return on investment is high. Besides a smattering of newspaper articles, and interviews with the hosts of morning talk shows and weak-signaled radio programs, chances are Chris and Luke won't garner the media attention that big-name entertainers or politicians do. After all, if they get any ink, it'll be mainly because of their sponsorships and the novelty of their situation; whereas, Tiger and Britney get ink because they are Tiger and Britney.

Hey, that's OK. These brand boys may seem a tad misguided to purists, but they sure as heck ain't dumb. They know grass roots marketing, which is, in essence, what they've been pitching all along. They were both interns at a PR firm before launching their spokesguy campaign. Luke was an honor student who, as a result of his promotional expertise, claimed to have propelled his band, "Big, Fat, Huge," to star status up and down the Jersey shoreline. And besides being the youngest patent holder in the United States, Chris is the winner of local- and state-level DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America) awards in advertising and marketing.

Just think: these two marketer minions were sly enough to request payment (a minimum of \$15,000) for corporate sponsorship, unlike most people who actually shell out cash for the privilege of donning Old Navy and Nike logo-laden garb.

It's not surprising that these two have a long range mission to inspire a spokesguy (and we can assume spokesgirl) revolution across college campuses. Let's just hope these plans don't backfire by producing an excess of spokes-students. The cola wars could get physical.

Of course, throughout the spokesguy campaign, interviewers hit Chris and Luke with the obvious questions and comments. Would they rule out any types of products? What happens if their reputations (and by association, the sponsors' reputations) become besmirched by the college temptations of drugs, alcohol and promiscuous sex? From the looks of things, their potential corporate sponsors needn't have been overly concerned. Chris and Luke seem to be no Goofus and all Gallant. These spokesguys are exemplary students with high SAT scores and extracurricular dossiers that would rival the likes of the kid's from that *Rushmore* flick. So, alcohol, tobacco and sex-related products are out. However, Luke admitted that he'd get a tattoo, but only if the logo were to pass his stringent standards. One wonders why he doesn't bypass the logo and go straight for the bar code.

After nearly a year of hawking themselves, and whittling their potential sponsors down from a list of 15 interested companies, the fruits of their labor paid off. On June 18, 2001, Chris and Luke revealed the name of their new tuition sponsor, First USA.

"We want to thank everyone who was so supportive of our search to be the First Corporate Sponsored College Students in the country," declared their celebratory website communiqué. "It proves that students can be innovative, stick to a goal and achieve success! It takes hard work and commitment, but we are ready for the challenge!"

In addition, the would-be financial wizards announced their school picks. Both having begun school in the Fall semester of 2001, Luke is at the University of Southern California, and Chris attends Pepperdine University.

A press announcement featured a canned quote from the sponsor's spin maestro, Doug Filak, a.k.a. senior vice president of marketing strategy at First USA: "First USA is committed to supporting education, innovation and financial responsibility.... These young men

embody all three. We are thrilled to reward their resourcefulness and financial management initiative by sponsoring their college education."

A lot of buff-bodied men and women strip their ways through college, too, but it's doubtful that First USA would consider erotic dancing a "financial management initiative."

Added Chris, "Our successful partnership with First USA is the result of a lot of thinking and financial planning.... We want to send a powerful message to students everywhere that financial planning can make great things happen."

Surely the spokesperson initiative required a lot of strategic thinking and planning. However, Chris and Luke have completely bypassed the financial planning route to which they supposedly espouse as First USA "student ambassadors." They're not flippin' burgers in the dining hall after classes or taking out student loans to make ends meet. Chris and Luke are foregoing sound financial budgeting strategies in exchange for a big pay out that could end up costing them in the long run. Not only are they symbols of sycophancy; Chris and Luke are true emblems of instant gratification at any expense – not exactly synchronous with the basic principles of financial planning. One wonders whether a sponsorship contract with the local state lottery or some chain of check cashing establishments would have been more appropriate.

What we've got here are a couple of typical All-American teenagers who have been so exposed to the ubiquitous efforts of marketers and advertisers throughout their lives that not only have they come to acknowledge marketing as a fact of life; they've come to embrace it as an integral part of their personal beings. Whether or not this unapologetically fraternizing attitude is representative of their age group as a whole, or a broader move among all Americans towards willing corporate-lapdogism, is debatable. However, the very notion that Chris's and Luke's college peers will accept their huckster-like behavior as normal is perhaps indicative of an ever-expanding ad-culture comfort zone. If the fact that most college kids these days have abandoned black light posters in favor of complete collections of Absolut Vodka and Altoids Mints print ads is any indication, Chris and Luke may be trendsetters.

Jonathon Bond and Richard Kirshenbaum would probably agree. The co-founders of marketing communications company, kirshenbaum bond & partners, write in *Under The Radar: Talking to Today's Cynical Consumer*, "Brands help satisfy us emotionally."

Some people are in support of the Chris and Luke initiative. Early on in their campaign, a BrandEra.com interviewer intimated to the boys, "Personally, I hope it works." Still, others worry that the willingness of Chris and Luke to become marketing message mediums in exchange for tuition payments could result in more than signs on the dotted line; they could, proverbially, be *apocalyptic* signs on the dotted line.

Who are the suckers here -- the wannabe spokesguys or the sponsor companies? At first glance, many would argue that their transformation from regular kids to brand vessels would be worth every marketing budget penny paid to Chris and Luke. The irony lies in what seems like the "wow, can you believe we're gettin' away with this?" attitudes of the boys. They do admit that a lot of work will go into promoting First USA, but it appears as though this will be a labor of love, albeit financially reimbursed and most likely feigned because of it. One can't help but wonder about the people who befriend Chris and Luke along the promo path. Will they be the suckers, enlisted as buddies merely for their potential message spreading capabilities? Or, will Chris and Luke be used for their arsenal of free giveaway goodies? In that case, let's hope they at least get a lay or two out of it.

In the end, by eating, breathing, walking and talking brands, Chris and Luke could be missing out on some of the most personally formative years of their lives. The truth is that in selling themselves, they may be selling themselves short.

## Student Union Infiltration

The tale of Chris and Luke is an extreme case. The thing is, marketers realize that college kids like them are more than happy to become brand apostles if the price is right. And, as many of us know through personal experience, the price doesn't have to be too high for it to be right for down and out undergrads. In fact, sometimes a T-shirt and a handful of Tootsie-Rolls will suffice.

Boston's grassroots college marketing firm, The Magma Group is well aware of this. The firm implements college campaigns for all sorts of companies, usually in an effort to harvest valuable data including names, email addresses and other private information. Rather than attempt this data hunt on its own, The Magma Group gets the students themselves, through its large network of college organizations, to do the work. It's all part of the company's "Team Magma" operation.

In one of its campaigns for Web-based research applications maker, KangarooNet, The Magma Group lured two Brandeis University freshmen with promises of one dollar towards their rowing team's spring break fund for each email address gathered. This pittance afforded Magma and Kanga the ability to approach young adults on their home turf, through familiar members of their own community. Peer persuasion is the key to marketing efforts such as this. In fact, it was a major contributing factor to the successful gathering of 200 Brandeis students' email addresses in one day. Of course, the freebies strewn about the sign-up table didn't hurt either.

Considering the fact that it's hard enough to get a few people to sign a petition, much less divulge their personal contact information, the magnitude of Magma's feat is obvious. What's startling is that the company's clients often save serious campaign cash, despite the potentially-lucrative rewards of their data collection strategies. You see, since the marketers compensated their low wage lackeys with school team vacation funds in lieu of actual paychecks, they were technically contributing to collegiate activity fund raising. This means that the precious student union presence came free of charge to KangarooNet and The Magma Group. Hmm...do you think the companies were able to work a cut of the rowing team's sexy spring break video profits into the deal, too?

As noted above, this scenario is far less extreme than that presented in Chris's and Luke's promo parable. It does, nonetheless, reveal a willingness on the part of the students involved (also known as peers in the marketing industry) to participate in corporate marketing efforts. Again, they are exploiting their relationships with other students in exchange for monetary compensation.

Another factor in the success of college marketing campaigns like this is the naiveté of the students involved. Chances are, an attempt to gather the personal information of older adults would prove a bit more tricky. Still, one should never underestimate the eagerness of folks to compromise their values and relationships when there's a payoff involved. In recent years, some have even been inclined to do so on their wedding days. That's right. There's a growing trend towards easing the discomfort of monetary nuptial nuisances through the aid of commercial allies.

## With This Ad I Thee Wed

Natasha Allen of Cincinnati found her sponsored wedding to be such a success, she now sells a \$29.95 sponsored wedding kit through her website, *TheSponsoredWedding.com*. Various news stories have highlighted Ms. Allen's impressive ability to lure bridal service providers into donating their wares. All in all, she managed to convince 15 businesses to supply free hitch-up stuff, including a \$200 cake, a \$250 wedding gown and \$400 wedding bands and an engagement ring. It sounds like a lot to just give away for free, right? Hardly. Those measly offerings awarded sponsors precious promotion at a private event during which guests are expecting to see advertisements about as much as they're expecting the average marriage to last. In addition to inviting their sponsors to the wedding, Allen and her groom, Charles, vowed to acknowledge the companies' generosity in five ways: thanking them on the couple's website and in the programs, listing company names on invitations, displaying brochures on a reception table and placing 4-by-6-inch placards near corresponding items.

The ring giver was named (no joke) Mr. Bill's Family Jewels. Talk about fodder for a rousing reception dinner conversation. Luckily, there were some more tastefully named sponsors of the Allen wedding. After all, that's what separates a successful sponsored wedding from an unsuccessful one: good taste. The more elegantly named Heritage Village and Royal Carriage were among the bridal bestowers that responded to ads placed by the Allens in various newspapers. Surely, donators relished the opportunity to promote their services to all invited eyeballs, otherwise known as cherished friends and family.

Allen's website makes no bones about the fact that she sold her guests' attention for free wedding stuff either. "How Is It Possible?" inquires the site copy which responds, "Because you give the vendors what they want: exposure. You tastefully include them in your entire wedding process. You refer them to your friends and loved ones through invitations, programs, brochures, you decide. It doesn't matter, because all you'll have to do on your special day is sit back and enjoy the fruit of your labor."

In another on-site question and answer exchange, *TheSponsoredWedding.com* reads, "So What's The Catch? There is none... The truth is, you can't afford not to do it. The average cost of a wedding is over \$18,000. Why start your union in debt that will take years to pay off?"

Another twenty-something woman featured in a *New York Times* article solicited companies, wooing them with promises of "complete creative freedom" and exposure to an enticing group of soon-to-be-married friends. Man, talk about undying devotion...to one's sponsors.

And then there was Philadelphia couple Tom Anderson and Sabrina Root. Married in August of 1999, Anderson finagled his way into receiving donated wedding rings, a week in Cancun, Mexico, and even perfume for the bride from an Oscar de la Renta distributor. In total, the \$34,000 event was funded almost entirely by 24 sponsors who were mentioned in invitations, buffet table cards, dinner table scrolls, thank-you cards, a local newspaper ad and, perhaps most disturbing, a verbal "thank you" following the initial toast. What stopped Anderson from garnering some additional goodies in exchange for a wedding vow ad placement? "I take thee, Sabrina, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, until death do us part, in which case I'll be sure to employ the experts at Amigone Brothers Funeral Home for all my funeral needs."

Perhaps one of the best known sponsored wedding extravaganzas is NBC's "Today Throws a Wedding." The lucky couple is chosen by *The Today Show* audience via the Web, but that's not all the fickle crowd controls. According to the Today Throws a Wedding official rules, things like the "nature and length of ceremony, choice of wedding dress, groom's and wedding party attire, cake, flowers, music, wedding rings, honeymoon itinerary, destination and scheduling" are all subject to the whims of Katie Couric fans and Today Show staff.

The Today Show couples' desire for an extravagant, special wedding day clouded their views so much so that they resorted to having every aspect of it dictated by complete strangers. Isn't it ironic?

As for the ceremony itself, it is broadcast on The Today Show, commercials and all. The first Today Show sponsored wedding, held on September 6, 2000, featured Peter Ginsberg and Melanie Nelson, who exchanged vows on the plaza at Rockefeller Center. Needless to say, the couple was afforded the utmost respect on this precious day, during which a helicopter whirred from above, a commercial break interrupted the couple's trapeze down the aisle and two men who were dressed as nuns to promote a film

clamored for camera attention. It's a good thing that NBC conducted background checks to ensure that the couple was "of good moral character" and had "nothing in their background that would be an embarrassment to NBC News or TODAY."

2001's Today Show couple, Jennifer Larou and Jeffrey Scott were wed on September 5. Photos of the sacred marriage ceremony can be viewed on the MSNBC website. One particularly memorable shot features the mother of the bride as she is escorted by the groom's college buddy. The Duane reade pharmacy across the street makes for a lovely backdrop.

For some couples, the motivating factor goes beyond saving a few bucks. Some don't even have the bucks to save in the first place. A bride-to-be in her early twenties wrote to iVillage.com's "Wedding Women," Eileen Livers and Monica Bernstein about her wedding worries. She complained of health afflictions that impeded her ability to work, a mother who was working two jobs, and an estranged dad. She'd been "growing desperate about finances" and had pondered the possibilities of a sponsored wedding.

On her website, Natasha Allen defends the sponsored wedding by commenting, "If you insist on arguing with the person who calls you immoral and materialistic, try asking them how moral it is to throw yourself and your family into debt trying to pay for a wedding you can't afford. Then ask them how much they paid for their own wedding. Then sit back and watch them squirm."

Although at the outset, this argument could serve as justification for going the sponsored ceremony route, it uncovers a broader societal outlook. Essentially, hemorrhaging money on what amounts to a less than 24-hour period has become requisite in our culture. According to a recent Bride's Magazine study, the average cost of a wedding in the United States runs anywhere from around \$17,000 in the Southeast and West Coast to over \$31,000 in the New York Metropolitan region. Take a look at any print or online wedding magazine's media kit (the information published to woo advertisers) and you'll discover that advertising there will put you in front of a highly targeted, niche audience that's looking to spend, spend, spend. Rather than eschew what's at the heart of the pocket-pilfering problem (i.e. marketing-driven, gluttonous, over-consumption), some couples have chosen to accept what they've come to conceive of as inevitably unaffordable nuptials. When the only options in one's veiled view are either a broken

bank or an infiltrative corporate presence, it's no wonder that sales pitching to wedding guests is seen as a lesser of two evils.

The wedding industry hasn't amassed \$70 billion a year as a result of social mores alone. The "need" for everything from a special set of night-before pajamas (no doubt for virginal-renewal purposes) to wedding insurance has certainly been propelled by the folks peddling the stuff. Hey, that's their prerogative and that's how they stay in business. Here's the clincher though: all this gluttonous spending has led couples to believe that the only way out of their self-inflicted financial woes is to cheapen their special days with sponsorship messages. In essence, by assisting in the promotion of extravagant wedding goods and services, they are perpetuating the very unnecessary, unaffordable indulgence that's at the root of their self-imposed problems. It's a never ending circle, just like those golden wedding bands.

## Learn 'em Young

Let's get back to the youth marketers. Lately, more and more adolescents and teens are enthusiastic about their brand proliferation apprenticeships. Some are eerily so. Take Brandon De Hoyos, a sixteen-year-old who seems to relish his promotion of Bolt.com, a popular teen website that focuses heavily on propagating online, communal experiences among the young'uns. As a member of Bolt's brigade of teenage representatives, De Hoyos has distributed Bolt stickers and rubber-band bracelets in exchange for similar Bolt bric-a-brac. He's quite appreciative of the marketing skills he's attained through his Bolt branding experiences. In a *Business 2.0* article, he came across as more spin doctor than typical teen: "I've learned how marketing works as a rep.... Now I am able to talk to anyone and to get the word out about a product."

On the outset, it's heartening to see a teen with such a level-head. It just doesn't seem normal, though. In fact, it's downright disturbing. Not only is Bolt blatantly using kids like De Hoyos for financial gain, this kid sees right through to the heart of the scam! He's providing highly valued branding and promotional services and receiving worthless trinkets in return. Like Chris and Luke, he may be gaining some semi-professional marketing experience, but at what cost?

Bolt.com, like numerous other companies targeting the capricious cash cows of Generation Y, has taken focus groups to a new level through peer-to-peer marketing strategies. No longer will luring kids into a Saturday afternoon research session with the promise of ten bucks and all the Jolly Ranchers they can eat do. Instead, Bolt takes advantage of the eagerness with which its target market craves involvement. The company's legion of li'l sales reps even helps identify new promo venues by alerting Bolt to events and places in their hometowns where kids are known to hang.

Again, why hit the kid consumers over the head with advertising when they're willing to spread the word amongst themselves? Besides disseminating the message more expeditiously, it comes across as far more genuine than could be managed by any other type of promotional campaign. Let's put it this way: whose mascara recommendation is a teenage girl more likely to trust – a billboard's, a print ad's or her friend Courtney's from second period Chem class?

One of the more effective ways to achieve trust is through viral marketing, according to Brad Powers, EVP of marketing at word-of-mouth marketing company, eWOMP. In a *Webpronews* article, he refers to viral marketing as "the concept of making each customer a marketer by encouraging word-of-mouth referrals." Powers writes, "Trust will always be more powerful than flashy design and expensive ad campaigns, and when information comes from someone you trust, it is much more powerful."

The brand embrace displayed by Chris, Luke and Bolt brand vessel De Hoyos exemplifies a larger phenomenon displayed by the bulk of Generation Y. Otherwise known as the Millennial Generation, these kids born after 1982 are referred to as conventional, cohesive and cooperative team players. They are attracted to big brands, they travel in packs, and are known to think like members of Star Trek's Borg Collective. This herd mentality lends itself to the success of peer-to-peer marketing efforts like those employed by Bolt. Even Bolt's co-founder, Jane Mount, has been quoted on online marketing resource ChannelSeven.com as saying that today's teens "have no problem with being marketed to as long as the product is personally relevant."

A paper published in 1999 by ESOMAR (World Association of Opinion and Marketing Research Professionals) for the Worldwide Youth Marketing Research Conference affirms the existence of this mindset among many of today's youth. It introduces "peer group" marketing as a new way to target the youth market and stresses that marketers should no longer perceive wee-consumers as members of a defined age group. Rather, tots should be defined as members of a peer group.

Incidentally, all sorts of organizations have employed the peer persuasion technique (often referred to as social marketing) in campaigns aiming to prevent things like teen smoking, pregnancy and AIDS. It's certainly not a new idea, however, it appears that corporate marketers have grown more confident of peer-to-peer marketing powers in the recent past.

## Wash That Brand Right Into Your Head

The peer-to-peer promotion principle goes hand in hand with one that, though slightly less relationship-redefining, is reliant upon a conversation co-opt. Viral marketing goes by a host of alternate titles including exponential, wildfire, domino, organic, word-of-mouth, word of mouse, and referral marketing. By any name, its goal is the same as that of peer-to-peer marketing: to increase the reach of a marketing message to a targeted group far beyond the original audience. In other words, sow the sales seed, inspire the consumers themselves to tend and extend the brand's base, then reap the organically grown rewards.

In advertising industry circles, allusions to a 1970s ad for a Faberge Organics shampoo often crop up when viral marketing is discussed. The spot's dialogue cleared away the dirt and residue, stripping viral marketing down to its pure essence: "I told two friends, and they told two friends, and so on, and so on, and so on...."

In his propagation paean entitled *Unleashing the Ideavirus*, Seth Godin prognosticates that "the future belongs to marketers who establish a foundation and process where interested people can market to each other." Coincidentally, Godin demonstrated that his theories work in practice as well as on e- and tree-paper. After initially offering his Ideavirus book for free download, a total of 3,550 people had referred the book to a friend as of May 30, 2001 and 2,980 of those friends downloaded it. The proof is in the puddin', or in this case, the profits; also by May of 2001, *Unleashing the Ideavirus* was ranked #5 on Amazon.com's bestseller list.

If it's so easy to plant a promotion and watch it bloom, why do advertisers bombard us with billboards, radio and TV spots, and direct marketing mailers? Let's put it this way: numerous marketers are putting less stock in those traditional advertising formats and more and more into highly integrated, seamless subterfuge. On a daily basis, most Americans come in contact with an overwhelming ad onslaught. In order to counteract and cut through the so-called ad clutter, advertisers are learning that subtlety can lead to success.

As Ideavirus man, Godin, declares in his book, "Marketing by interrupting people isn't cost-effective anymore."

Bond and Kirshenbaum's *Under The Radar* also follows this notion: "as American consumers we have been exposed to twice as many ads as the next most heavily advertised country, England." The authors believe that consumers have become "twice as cynical" and "twice as good at tuning out those nasty messages." So, they opine, marketing "should be invisible, with the consumer feeling the benefit rather than having to uncomfortably digest its overt message."

One way to add a spoonful of sugar to that marketing medicine is by enabling people to feel as though they're a part of something hip. Even the ad industry folk who aim to envelop us in their big brand hugs have displayed their own desires to belong to a virally voluminous community. A beloved yet brutal film portrayal of the ad agency bubble known as *Truth in Advertising* became a virally promoted email hit on Madison Avenue and across the globe a year or so ago. Featuring deadpan parodies of agency scenarios entitled "The Briefing" and "The Director's Pitch," this three-minute, sardonic knee-slapper encapsulated the ego-driven phoniness of the ad biz with shocking honesty.

Most agency execs could only dream of achieving the sort of organic hype surrounding the emailed mini-flick. Its success comes as no surprise, especially when the components of that success are analyzed.

The Truth fulfilled several viral campaign content criteria: it applied to a specific group, it traveled well within a community, and it was humorous, edgy and controversial, which gave it a good chance of getting passed along. By its nature, the typical marketing message doesn't have all those ingredients, so it often fails to trigger a Truth in Advertising-like phenomenon.

Perhaps the most significant factor found in any viral hit, be it strictly entertainment or its insidious commercial cousin, advertainment, is the "influencer." Also known as "sneezers" if you prefer Godin's Ideavirus-speak, they act as catalysts, endorsing a message with their seals of approval and sending it along, via email, word-of-mouth, or otherwise, to a host of recipients. Influencers serve to instill trust in a message -- to validate it. Think back to the trustworthiness of Chem class pal Courtney's mascara recommendation. This same credence can be applied to a spark plug brand referral from your neighborhood's resident motor head, or the juice box brand suggestion from your kid's Girl Scout troop

leader. The influential message disseminator broadens the all-important degree of separation between advertiser and end consumer. Remember: interruptive advertising is obsolete, so marketers must get the target audience to implement plan b amongst themselves.

One corporately-inspired viral marketing success with which most of us are far too familiar is Budweiser's Whassup?! campaign. Of course, the popular television ads don't fall under the viral umbrella, but the forwarded email hits inspired by the ads most certainly do. The campaign idea was derived from a two-minute film called "True" created by Whassup?! ad creator and director Charles Stone III. The TV spots presented a circle of friends phoning one another, exclaiming, "Whassup?!" with gravelly-throated inanity. In no time, fans paid homage to the ads through Web parodies featuring characters from the Superfriends, South Park and Star Wars. There was even a disturbing version inspired by Elian Gonzales-gate, in which Janet Reno swapped Whassups with the likes of Fidel Castro and the Miami Family. The downloadable mock ads retained the original Budweiser ad soundtrack, leaving the final "Watchin' the game, havin' a Bud" tagline intact. Surely Budweiser brand marketers couldn't be more delighted by the fact that their ad campaign had been lovingly embraced as a form of camaraderie bolstering entertainment.

Some of us may not get the fascination with the Whassup?! campaign, but most would admit that the spot-spoofs are a helluva a lot more entertaining than a solicitation from the Fuller Brush man. That's important. If advertisers want friends to email what amounts to a marketing message to other friends, it had better be entertaining. In the case of the Whassup?! parodies, the targeted consumers created the viral marketing content themselves. And if that weren't enough of a blessing for Budweiser, more than two million people a month were downloading the official Bud Whassup?! TV spots from the brand's website in 2000. Still, there's always the chance that some of those Whassup?! spoofs were actually released by Budweiser marketers in stealth mode. We may never know. Hey, in this world of ad infiltration, it can't hurt to be extra skeptical.

In a discussion with eWOMP's Brad Powers for *Sales Pitch Society*, he opined that the Whassup?! parody phenomenon "did little in terms of return on investment for its creators." In fact, he suggested that "while the joke was an example of a viral spread, I don't consider it viral marketing because it was not measurable or replicable." After all,

commented Powers, the difference between ol' fashioned word-of-mouth marketing or peer-to-peer recommendations and the stuff that takes place via the Internet, is that "Internet word-of-mouth marketing is measurable, quantifiable, replicable and scalable." That means that marketers are more apt to integrate this tactic into their overall campaign strategy because they can actually gauge their return on investment.

It's easy to discount the impact of the Whassup?! campaign and its subsequent viral components merely for their lack of measurability. If it weren't for the extraordinary response tracking capabilities of Internet advertising like online banner ads and email campaigns, Powers' argument would hold a lot less water, or in this case, beer. Question: if a Bud drinker yells, "Whassup?!" in the woods, does he make a sound?

Perhaps another forest-dweller, *The Blair Witch* would know. Before the opening of the film, *The Blair Witch Project*, over twenty fan websites and a Usenet group dedicated to the documentary-style horror film had appeared from the Internet's shadows. The flick's producers at Artisan Entertainment also hired about 100 "community trendsetters" (i.e. broke college kids) to distribute missing-person fliers featuring characters from the movie across the U.S. and at other strategic locales like the 1999 Cannes Film Festival. Apparently, a promo reel about the missing filmmakers even deceived the host of the Independent Film Channel's 'Split Screen' series, John Pierson who took it for truth. He featured the film on his show and following the segment, a call came in from an Albany detective who offered to help find the three missing moviemakers. Of course, no persons featured in the faux documentary were actually missing.

The immense buzz build-up resulted in gross profits of \$140 million domestically, not to mention some skepticism about the reality of the flick's fan-base itself. Some folks doubted the authenticity of the fan sites, claiming that they were in actuality planted by Artisan's crack marketing team themselves. And what of those online chat rooms, flooded with heated debates as to whether or not the film was truly a documentary or just a well-choreographed sham? Were they, too, fueled by marketing skills? Some dubious souls even dared to question the credulity of a thumbs-up posted by tinsel town gossip, Harry Knowles, on his *Ain't It Cool News* film review website; it was rumored that he hadn't seen the movie before he deemed *The Blair Witch Project* "The most creepy fuckin' mockumentary made ... ever."

Marketers are realizing that online banter like that of Harry Knowles and his site visitors can greatly impact a company's bottom line. For example, a glut of negative posts to a Web message board about the beta version of some video game hardware could damage brand reputation among influential gamers before the product is even launched.

Among other things, the Internet has become a massive focus group forum. New York-based BuzzMetrics has made a business of tapping into the wealth of online market research data derived from user-generated Web content. The company's software sifts through thousands of online newsgroups, message boards, product reviews and even personal home pages and harvests references to the company or brand in question. Then the data are loaded into a central database and analyzed. According to the Buzzmetrics website, the "data can be used to identify the individuals within those communities that wield particularly strong influence for specific issues, product categories, or market segments. Companies will use this to identify, analyze, and mobilize opinion leaders, activists, and early adopters." Who says the Web provides anonymity?

## Bad Girls Get Spammed

Despite the existence of well-planned, long-range viral marketing strategies like The Blair Witch promotions, the majority of the viral campaigns with which a lot of us come in contact on a regular basis attack our email in-boxes. Even if you've never received a marketing message via email, chances are you've experienced the phenomenon. Think of the banal dumb blonde jokes your college drinkin' buddy passes along to you, or those mushy emails prompting you to forward them along to at least five other people "who could use the power of angels in their lives." It's the classic chain-letter mentality that keeps these things rolling along.

It didn't take long for marketers to catch onto the power of email. Sure, we've all been spammed by the "Got Debt?," "Bad girls need luv 2," "Make a Million NOW" shysters, but those messages don't constitute as viral marketing mail. The difference is that, most people don't forward those emails to others. Most people don't even open them. The mission behind a viral marketing email campaign is to entice the reader to send it along to a friend, perpetuating the marketing message and sometimes promoting a related offer. For example, whether they like it or not, folks with Yahoo! email accounts repeatedly inquire as to whether their email recipients...uh...Yahoo! (present tense). That's because a promotional note is automatically tacked on to the end of all messages sent through Yahoo's free mail service.

Then there are the more full-on viral marketing campaigns like the one VarsityBooks.com ran. The college books site prompted students who registered as affiliates to email VarsityBooks.com links to classmates and friends. In exchange, senders received 5 percent of the profits derived from purchases resulting from the email messages they sent. This sort of strategy is ubiquitous in the realm of online promotion. Although its effects may pale in comparison to those of peer-to-peer marketing, this type of effort can have a similar impact on people and their relationships with others. Essentially, friends and acquaintances become promotional pitch-people and target markets. Sure, people often mix business with pleasure. The thing is, that sending promotional emails to friends puts them in a different light, turning them into sales leads, notches on the money belt.

Sometimes emailers aren't prompted to pass along messages simply because they'll make a quick buck from it. Sometimes they feel obligated to click the forward button.

Consider a viral campaign ran by *Cool Site of the Day* in conjunction with American Express. In the days following one in a series of school shootings in the U.S. (This one was at Santana High School in Santee, CA on March 5, 2001.), Cool Site sent a message to its site registrants that began, "Hello, I am Mike Corso, the owner of Cool Site of the Day. This message has little to do with Cool Site of the Day. This message is about you and me and the country we live in.... As I sit in my home office in Westchester, NY, I'm troubled and disgusted by the news of another school shooting. Rather than plod along with a sense of helplessness over the tragic event in San Diego, I've decided to use the Internet in a unique way to do some good. But I need your help."

The missive continued, notifying readers that with each registration through the American Express Blue Card site, Cool Site would donate \$10 (a third of its per-customer acquisition commission from Amex) to Teaching Tolerance, an organization that helps "teachers foster equity, respect and understanding in the classroom and beyond."

Cool Site's plea conjured thoughts of late night infomercials: "Let's make something great happen. Complete the short application now," it instructed. The chain letter factor was also employed: "This effort will only be successful if you pass this message along to as many people as possible. Please forward the entire contents of this message to your friends and family, your business associates and anyone else you can think of."

The letter concluded, "This message has little to do with Cool Site of the Day. This message is about you and me and the world we live in." Well, that's sweet 'n' all, but it's misleading. Cool Site most definitely stood to gain exposure and possibly commission profits through each forwarded email.

On the flipside, Cool Site did claim that it would donate a portion of its commission dollars to Teaching Tolerance. Plus, if Cool Site did not benefit financially through the Amex partnership, its business would suffer, and along with it the prominent forum through which it can promote the cause in the first place.

We've all been disheartened by school shootings; however, whether or not the Teaching Tolerance cause is a worthy one is beside the point. The people who passed this email along to "anyone else they could think of" exploited their relationships with those recipients in an effort to quell their own feelings of helplessness and guilt. In essence, although their intentions were probably pure, they became accessories to a sales scheme and made a target market of their email circle of friends.

Imagine if all of your close friends worked on commission and never left the sales pitch behind. Would you question their true intentions? Would you tire of the perpetual promotion? Or would you just get used to it? Although their implications vary in intensity, viral and peer-to-peer marketing schemes rely upon friends or acquaintances becoming salespeople. Viral marketing establishes a degree of separation between advertiser and target market. The message disseminator is no longer viewed as a cold, impersonal business entity, and the message receiver is no longer a mere number in some demographic group.

In that case, who takes the place of the cold, impersonal advertiser? That's right: the person relaying the advertising missive. Therein lie the negative effects of viral marketing when it comes to the individual and the relationship in our society. The viral marketing messenger, i.e. the friend or acquaintance, assumes the salesperson role, thus shifting the relationship from a pure, unencumbered connection to a commercially tainted one. The person on the receiving end can respond a number of ways, all of which transform the pre-promotional situation. Think of it as a Choose Your Own ADventure book:

- A. He can accept the message, embrace it as his own and continue to proliferate it.
- B. He can choose to disregard the message entirely. Or,
- C. He can go one step further by decrying the commercial corrosion of the relationship.

All options have negative implications. Choice A demonstrates a willingness to dilute the purity of the relationship with advertiser influence. Choice B. implies a dissatisfaction with the contents of the message, or with the intentions of the sender. The recipient wonders, "Why did he send me this junk? Is he trying to sell me something?" Choice C. displays a resentful attitude, either towards the message sender, the marketer behind the message, or both. This could cause a serious rift in the relationship.

## On Second Thought

Maybe the effects of these marketing strategies are being taken way too seriously here. After all, isn't this viral/peer-to-peer marketing stuff just an extension of the classic over-the-backyard-fence product recommendation? Most of us have suggested specific items to others, or discussed among friends the superiority of sparring soda brands. These are natural occurrences that do nothing to demean or cheapen a relationship. They emerge from real, honest conversation and life experience.

Why are viral marketing tactics any different? Because they are just that: marketing tactics. Here, the conversation or messaging is prompted by the marketer, whose ideas are then transferred through individuals. This ability to incite consumers to spread the sales pitch among themselves is the ultimate win for the marketer.

Are marketers increasing their use of these techniques because they work so well, or are they increasing their use of these techniques because people have become more susceptible to and accepting of them? When confronted with recent phenomena like student sponsorship and wedding ceremonies, many would lean towards the latter. As indicated by Chris's and Luke's sponsorship willingness, and the trend towards branded nuptials, our society has gradually come to accept advertising and marketing as inherent components of life. Certainly, in a capitalist society, advertising and marketing are elemental and must exist. However, societal pressures and marketing efforts have prompted people to take on financial liabilities they cannot afford, like extravagant wedding events for instance. The currency of self-respect and honest relations is used to pay for these misguided decisions. People become brand vessels, sacrificing little pieces of themselves in exchange for a few fleeting benefits. This embrace and integration of brands into the individual's psyche, this prostitution of thought and action, amounts to a barter of Faustian proportions. The irony is that, in most cases, this modern day transaction actually lessens the power of the brand vessel (i.e. the message disseminator or spokesperson), and in turn, bolsters the strength of the brand itself.

Some disagree. Take Amanda Keckonen, director of marketing and promotions at NYC's trendy nightclub, SPA, for instance. In a discussion for *Sales Pitch Society*, she contends that non-traditional marketing campaigns, specifically peer-to-peer and word-of-mouth efforts, are the only strategies that truly put the power in the hands of the consumer

because they allow for a dialogue between brand and potential buyer. Guerrilla marketing (a blanket term used to classify non-traditional strategies involving anything from street team representatives to stunts intended to garner media attention) is just about the only kind of marketing that Keckonen can stomach.

Referring to guerrilla marketing tactics, the twenty-something stresses, "It's the only type that gives the customer a fighting chance."

Like many people of her generation, she resents the ubiquitous bombardment of advertising that plagues our daily lives. In fact, following a stint selling marketing programs at NYC agency, Renegade Marketing, Keckonen felt burnt out. "The only thing I wanted to do was become an anarchist," exaggerates the contemplative, bright-eyed Keckonen, "I thought there was too much marketing."

During the early days of her career, Keckonen worked for various NYC ad agencies with clients like Brown and Williamson and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. One agency and its "brand ambassadors," some of whom were supervised by Keckonen, infiltrated bars and clubs in order to promote specific cigarette brands to adults. Dressed in plainclothes, the brand ambassadors would approach smokers and strike up a conversation. Promotional overtures would be made only to those club-goers who were smoking or holding smoking paraphernalia, such as a lighter or pack of smokes. Slick conversationalists would work-in the marketing shtick as surreptitiously as possible, aiming to convince the fellow smoker to switch brands. Some of these Ambassadors were also responsible for data capture, meaning the more information they could retrieve about the bar patron, the better.

## Grass Roots Sprout Astroturf

Many people would find this approach unsettling, wouldn't they? After discovering that the hottie you've been rapping with for the last twenty minutes is only trying to sell you something, can you imagine being comfortable with that fact, much less getting a kick out of it? Believe it or not, while heading up teams of Ambassadors, Keckonen regularly fielded questions like, "What a cool job! How can I get one?"

So, it's no wonder that blue-chip firms like Daimler Chrysler and Procter & Gamble are taking word-of-mouth marketing seriously nowadays. No longer is viral buzz a happy accident, it's planned for strategically and its success is measured (albeit not as precisely as online or traditional forms of advertising). It's also much cheaper than other forms of advertising. A July 30, 2001 cover story in *Business Week* surveys the big brand buzz boom, covering viral campaigns developed for Ford, Lee Jeans and others. Ford Motor Co. enticed influential trendsetters like deejays and celebrity assistants to drive the Ford Focus for six months and distribute branded trinkets to people who expressed interest in the car. During the first year of Focus availability, Ford sold over 286,000 Focus units.

The Ford campaign was fairly transparent in comparison to another featured in the *Business Week* piece which was developed for VF Corp.'s Lee Dungarees by agency Fallon McElligott. During the summer of 2000, VF Corp. sent emails to 200,000 "influential" fellas in the targeted 17 to 22 year-old demographic. The emails included three short-films created to look like low-budget homemade video clips, each highlighting a different person. The company's research showed that on average, recipients forwarded the mini-movies to six friends each. Apparently, about 100,000 unique visitors clogged websites affiliated with the covert operation. The kids had fallen for it. They wanted to know what these folks in the film shorts were all about. Then, VF dropped the brand bomb on 'em, announcing through radio and TV ads that the whole thing had been a marketing ploy to promote an online computer game. So, how can a silly game sell dungarees? Well, revealed the ads, in order to advance in the game, players would be required to retrieve secret codes (product I.D. numbers) from Lee clothing. According to the *Business Week* article, sales of Lee garb rose 20% in 2000.

Teens aren't the only ones with friends to chat up and money to burn. That's why Hasbro Games has resorted to recruiting fourth and fifth-graders to serve as marketing

munchkins to talk-up its POX game. Now that sounds like a good reason for parents to home-school their children!

Since more and more international corporations are adopting grass roots marketing as integral components of ad campaigns (sometimes referred to as "astroturfing" when the big boys take it on), Big Fat and agencies like it are in demand. A July 31, 2001 report in London's *Evening Standard* sheds a light, although a dim one, on the practices of "the new secret agents of capitalism." It alludes to the notion that viral marketers have clung to for years: people are far too jaded these days to be susceptible to traditional forms of advertising like television ads or radio spots. So, companies selling everything from liquor, cigarettes and soft drinks to medicine and movies are employing Big Fat for its under-the-radar expertise.

As quoted in the article, Jonathan Ressler, Big Fat's co-founder puts it bluntly, "Using undercover techniques is just an alternative communication channel. It's real-life product placement. We put products in people's hands in a real way."

Here it is, straight from the Big Fat mouth. Now that word-of-mouth marketing has become measurable (advertisers can actually track the return on their investment), human beings are becoming media placements. In other words, in the eyes of the advertiser, people are on par with broadcast commercial breaks and roadside billboards. This isn't empowering for anyone but the advertiser.

Now, rather than diluting the marketing message to ensure mass comprehension by a broadly categorized group, marketers are relying upon the individual's personal expression to customize the advertorial missive for them. They also must count on the brand vessel's willing participation. And remember: the majority of this participatory promotion is unpaid.

## Sociology Questions

Some folks appreciate a personalized marketing message from a friend. Anne Holland is one. She's the publisher of *MarketingSherpa.com*, a website that serves the marketing community, and is a wealth of knowledge when it comes to viral marketing campaigns. For *Sales Pitch Society*, she was asked if she thinks that peer-to-peer and viral marketing tactics have any implications in terms of the way people interact with one another.

Holland concludes, "the reason why you're sending this [viral marketing email] to your friend is not because you like the marketing message. It's because you like some of the information, or you think it's fun, whatever.... You are aware it's also a marketing message. Your friend's also aware it's a marketing message." She continues, "It's like cutting out an ad in the *New York Times* for a movie and saying, 'Hey, we've gotta go see this movie,' and handing it to the guy in the cubicle next to you."

Of course it's not detrimental to a relationship when someone recommends a product or service to a friend or acquaintance. However, there's a disconnect in the way that many marketers seem to rationalize the viral or peer-to-peer components of their campaigns. Take Holland's movie ad clipping example. The original intent of that advertisement was not to spur word-of-mouth. Instead, that ad was placed in that newspaper as a stand-alone message from the film's production company to the persons viewing that ad in the manner it was placed in the paper.

One difference between the ad-clipping scenario and a viral marketing campaign is that the latter employs human beings and their relationships with one another as an inherent part of the marketing strategy. The fact that the product promoting shill is willing to serve his intended role as brand vessel is an integral part of the overall marketing campaign in the first place. He has become a walking, talking media placement.

There's another differentiating aspect of viral or peer-to-peer promotional messages to consider. As learned by many a Communications 101 student, the components of just about any communiqué can be defined according to the S-M-C-R communication system model (Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver). The Sender originates the message, the Message is the actual information being relayed, the Channel is the method of message transmission and the Receiver acts as the audience. As for the movie ad, the

Sender is the film advertiser, the Message is the content of the ad itself, the Channel is the newspaper and the Receiver is the newspaper reader.

Apply this model to a viral marketing email campaign for a film, however, and it's not so easy to fill in the blanks. The only component that's clearly defined is the Channel: in this case, the email transmission. The Receiver is perpetually changing as the Message is passed along. As for the Sender, who or what is it -- the film advertiser or the individual/s forwarding the email? And the Message is most difficult to isolate; is it the ad copy or video stream disseminated by the advertiser, or the ever-changing personal text which accompanies it ("Hey man, Neil and Bob saw this flick and they said it rocked.")? Despite the muddled components, if the email campaign successfully promotes the film, the communication remains clear and intact. It gets through.

If viral marketing, in fact, doesn't jibe with the classic model for communication, is there any doubt that these ad strategies have some bearing on human interaction? Like many marketers, Holland doesn't see it.

"Look, if a campaign works, it works," she declares. "If it's something that's going to work over the long term, that's great. If it's something that's going to hurt your results a long time, then don't do it. I don't really think about the population as a whole."

She adds, "If my girlfriend calls me up and says, 'Oh my God! Did you hear that there's five dollars off on your favorite rootbeer down at the store?' I'm gonna say, 'Thank you. I'm gonna race right over. If she does that three times a week, I'm just gonna be like, 'cool.' I mean, who cares? I'd consider it a favor. If I don't consider it a favor, I'm going to say, 'Stop saying this stuff to me; I don't care about these things. I mean, c'mon.'"

Could it be that marketing efforts requiring individuals to act as advertising vehicles have no societal impact? Either way, this doesn't seem to be a hot topic of conversation in the marketing field.

"I'm sorry," Holland apologizes, "I'm just so un-used to thinking from any perspective except that of the marketer. You're asking me sociology questions, and I've gotta tell ya, I'm not a sociologist."

That's an intriguing statement, and one which many marketers would most likely echo. Still, most marketing pros have come to develop some understanding of how folks act en masse. After all, these are people who are immersed in the business of luring demographic groups of people to purchase products.

Maybe this whole sales pitch society notion is nonsense. Maybe peer-to-peer marketing strategies are merely extensions of the types of inter-personal communication we've known for centuries, and society will remain unaffected by them. After all, from the anti-globalization protest pamphlets of today, to yesterday's ballads passed from village-to-village, to the spread of Christianity, grassroots efforts have been regularly employed in message dissemination throughout history. However, most of history's evangelists have been motivated by the content of their messages. The anti-globalization brigade is motivated by, among other things, the notion that a world economy can only serve to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. The balladeer was propelled by a desire to tell the tale of a recent event, or maybe just share the love of a good tune. Early Christians felt compelled to introduce others to the teachings of Jesus. The thing is that they've all spread their ideas as a result of a deep belief in or affinity for the issue at hand -- the message itself.

So, what does that say about Chris and Luke, or the cigarette and liquor brand ambassadors, or the Whassup?! email senders? Do they, too, believe wholeheartedly in the import and relevance of what they're preaching? What does that say about our society and the mindset of the people living in it if they do feel strongly about the sponsored word they're spreading? What does it say about them if they don't?

## About the Author

*Sales Pitch Society* was written by Kate Kaye with one goal in mind: to be read, discussed and contemplated. Kate Kaye is a freelance writer who regularly covers the advertising and marketing industry. Her work has been published in *AdAge*, *Business 2.0*, *Creativity*, *BrandEra's BrandNews*, *NewMedia*, *Revolution Magazine* and other publications. Kate is also the author of *The Lowbrow Lowdown*, a syndicated commentary column focusing on advertising and marketing related topics. The humorous and thought-provoking *Lowbrow Lowdown* can be found online at [www.LowbrowLowdown.com](http://www.LowbrowLowdown.com).

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