



# sales pitch society II

our human to humad' evolution

by Kate Kaye

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## ¡VIVA LA REVOLUCION!

"I'm really excited about the Word of Mouth revolution!"

The college-age conference-crasher shared that with me as we readied ourselves for another session, this one about measuring the results of Word of Mouth marketing campaigns. The wide-eyed convert was like a whirling dervish, clearly caught up in the frenzied energy brought on by charismatic speakers, wry pundits, schmoozing execs and complimentary chocolate bars. We were attending an event held in January by the Word of Mouth Marketing Association. The two-day Basic Training was a retreat of sorts, complete with moralistic mantras, zealous evangelism, idol worship, communal celebrations and, as always at these hype-fests, mutual praise among the missionaries. Veteran devotees and new converts had come from across the globe to learn more about developing marketing campaigns designed to get people to talk about their brands and products, a form of marketing known as Word of Mouth (WOM).

Indeed, the growing embrace of Word of Mouth tactics by the advertising and marketing industry is considered revolutionary. It sure sounds that way when hearing and reading the sermons of its high priests. Take Andy Sernovitz, CEO of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, a.k.a. WOMMA. Railing against "sleazy" marketing behavior, Sernovitz laid out the group's ethics catechism in an October, 2005 *iMediaConnection* article. He wrote, "The kind of marketing we do gives a powerful platform to consumers -- and forces marketers to respect them. We empower consumers by engaging with them in blogs, message boards, communities and in the real world. We give people the power to voice their dissatisfaction and expose dishonesty."

Sounds good, right? Hey, I appreciate respect. I like power. And I sure as hell don't want to be lied to or dissatisfied. I guess this whole WOM thing seems pretty OK.

But wait a minute. What about all those stories about stealth marketing? You know, the ones about chicks in bars promoting some new-fangled cocktail, but not letting on that they're being paid to do it? What about those phony fans posting positive reviews on the Web about movies and books without revealing their gigs as paid promoters?

No worries. WOMMA and its affiliated pundits and marketing firms have got it covered. If the WOM revolution is to truly take off, they say, that covert stuff has gotta go. The WOMMA code of ethics clearly states, "We encourage word of mouth advocates to disclose their relationship with marketers in their communications with other consumers...We stand against shell and undercover marketing, whereby people are paid to make recommendations without disclosing their relationship with the marketer." The commandments go on to stress the need for "Honesty of Opinion," noting, "We never tell identity is vital to establishing trust and credibility."

In November 2001, I offered *Sales Pitch Society* as a "heads up," a prognostication that "if this person-to-person marketing trend persists," it would have an impact on relationships and on society as a whole. Rather than simply ride the tide of this new human ad wave, I felt compelled to wonder aloud about the long-term effects of today's increasingly entrenched Sales Pitch Society.

At the time, the burgeoning phenomenon of engineered WOM was in its nascent stages, barely emerged from its primordial promo goo. Now, four years later, this buzz-fueled marketing species has evolved. It's walking upright, developing its own language, establishing cultural groups and social mores, and even christening leaders. WOM has spawned a bevy of marketing agencies specializing in its practice, a booming trade association, countless books and blogs written by a host of "experts," business conferences, boot-camp-like seminars and newly-devised methods for measuring success.

In fact, as a true testament to its presence, the WOM movement has prompted analysts to estimate its value as a full-fledged sector of the marketing industry: JWT Worldwide figures that over 85 percent of the nation's top 1,000 marketers are doin' it. Other appraisals show WOM as accounting for anywhere from \$40 million to \$150 million in annual marketing spending. Big ad agencies and advertiser clients like Hershey are even beginning to pay "slotting fees" to WOM marketing agency BzzAgent based on the number of people spreading the branded word and how long they do it.

Translation: marketers are spending millions of dollars to get us to talk, write, email, blog, rap – *whatever* – about their products. That's money they used to spend on TV spots or print ads or, hell, skywriting. They're not only tracking, aggregating and scrutinizing what

we say about their brands online, they're allocating marketing monies towards influencing us to do it more.

So, all those pie-charts and bar-graphs and stats that marketers employ to quantify return on their marketing investment are no longer just measuring how many people watched their ad or heard their ad or drove past their ad.

When it comes to WOM marketing, those pie-charts and bar-graphs and stats are measuring how many people *became* their ads. If that's not creepy enough, what's really disturbing is that today even more people are ready and willing to morph from human to *hum-ad*.

Please note: This is by no means an anti-capitalist or anti-advertising manifesto. In fact, it comes from the heart and mind of a spirited proponent of free market capitalism. Neither is this an effort to denigrate the individuals who work in the WOM industry. This is merely an attempt to spur further dialogue regarding the ethical and societal implications of engineered WOM marketing campaigns.

## THE BRANDING BREED

Of course, WOM proponents usually don't come out and say they want people to become their ads. When the "experts" are interviewed by the press, or promoting WOM in press releases and on book jackets, they allude to concepts like "consumer empowerment" and "brand ownership."

In October 2005 *The New York Times* published a story about people who create blogs dedicated to brands like Barq's root beer and the grocery store Trader Joe's. In it, WOM evangelist and co-author of the *Church of the Customer* blog Jackie Huba explained that these brand bloggers "feel like they own the brand, that it's theirs." WOMMA's *Word of Mouth 101* white paper called its member companies "innovative agencies who understand how to empower and amplify the voice of the consumer."

In an October 2005 *USA Today* article, Steve Knox, CEO of Procter and Gamble's Tremor, a community of 250,000 teen WOM campaigners, explained, "To be a [Tremor] member is empowering for a teen...You have a voice that will be heard, and you get cool information before your friends receive it."

Jamie Tedford, SVP marketing and media innovation at ad agency Arnold Worldwide, also noted the empowerment factor while speaking on a panel about his client, Volkswagen, at the recent Word of Mouth Basic Training event in Disney-fied Orlando. He stressed, "We have the responsibility to remind [consumers], 'You have the power to help market this car.' "

Imagine that! He's given us the power to do his job for him!

In a natural habitat such as a marketing conference, creatures of WOM let their guards down, and their rhetoric becomes a lot more revealing. During her discussion about people who participated in a WOM marketing campaign for Kettle Chips, Senior Account Executive at Maxwell PR Jen Scott commented, "They actually want to do our marketing for us, and so we let them."

It can't get much more blatant than that. Or maybe it can. During a panel on *Why People Talk*, Kerry Stranman, partner and chief strategist at research firm MotiveQuest put it simply: "You can get them to do the work for you."

Also at the conference, Dave Balter, founder and president of BzzAgent, made an intriguing comment. He referred to the conversations that consumers have with one another as “a media channel,” proclaiming, “This is a media channel. It's up to us to find out how to tap into it and harness it and organize it.”

One of the most prominent WOM-centric agencies, BzzAgent claims to have run over 250 “WOM Programs” for clients including Anheuser-Busch, Cadbury Schweppes, Levi's, Ralph Lauren and Sun Microsystems. The agency organizes campaigns driven by its network of over 100,000 people, called BzzAgents, who sign up to help talk up its clients' brands. When they discuss those brands with other people, BzzAgents file reports describing the conversations, and the agency in turn provides those reports to its clients.

According to its own marketing literature, here's how BzzAgent works with corporate marketers and ad agencies to develop WOM campaigns:

“You provide the WOM catalyst (put your ingenious strategic and creative departments to work) and we provide access to our trained WOM volunteers. They'll spread the word and keep you informed, while creating another revenue stream for you in the process. “Ka-ching,” indeed. Just like you organize and purchase other media for your clients, now you can easily harness the power of honest WOM.”

Here's my question: if our words, thoughts, opinions, conversations, and relationships are a “media channel,” are we comfortable with handing marketers the remote control? Because that's what a growing number of people are doing.

I can hear the WOM evangelists now. “No! It's the consumer who's controlling the remote, not us! It's no longer about top-down advertising! Consumers are dictating the marketing message now! We're ceding power to them!”

Could it be that WOM marketers have been spewing this Orwellian newspeak for so long, even they've fallen prey to it? This time, the doublethink slogans are not “War Is Peace, Freedom Is Slavery, Ignorance Is Strength.” They're more along the lines of:

Evangelism is Empowerment

Loyalty is Control

Influence is Altruism

## **PUTTING THEIR MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS**

We share our thoughts and opinions about products and brands, music, movies and TV shows all the time. In fact, 17.5 percent of conversations engaged in by college students aged 18-29 include talk about an organization, brand, product, or service, according to WOM researcher Walter J. Carl, Ph.D, an assistant professor in Northeastern's Department of Communication Studies.

So, what's new now? Well, what's new is that ad agencies, big corporate marketers, and even marketing-savvy small business people have begun considering what we say about their products, brands and services as a strategic media outlet. When we gab about their stuff, it's no longer viewed as a happy accident; it's becoming a component of their overall marketing strategies, worthy of budget allocation and new marketing department hires.

But if we're just talking, or typing, the way we normally would, what are they spending money on exactly? For one, they're hiring research firms such as MotiveQuest, Umbria and Nielsen BuzzMetrics to help them make sense of the WOM consumers create on the Web in blogs, forums and chat rooms. (Yep, the same Nielsen that's been the standard bearer for radio and television ratings for decades recently acquired BuzzMetrics to keep pace as WOM revolutionizes media.) These companies have even devised methods for interpreting our discussion data. They've developed impressive-looking equations and graphic representations of our off-the-cuff comments, reflective book and film reviews, product rants, and other so-called "Consumer Generated Media." While all sorts of marketers employ metrics like "Cost Per Acquisition" or "Cost Per Action" to measure the bang they get for their marketing bucks, WOM marketers have taken it to another level with metrics such as "Cost Per *Influencer*."

Some of us are settling in comfortably as we slip down the slope towards life under a microscope. After all, we do live in a world of credit card data breaches, online tracking cookies and warrantless wiretapping. Why shouldn't companies use tools and technologies that help them learn more about what consumers think of their brands? The fact is, when we post information on the Web, it's out there in plain daylight.

Like traditional media's letter-to-the-editor scribes and talk radio callers, many of us are spurred on by the notion that people will hear and read our words. And we're especially turned on by the thought of influencing others through our opinions.

That's where another piece of the WOM marketing pie comes in. Increasingly, advertisers are paying ad agencies to develop campaigns they claim will "create buzz" or "manage word-of-mouth." Some of these boutique marketing shops have been around for years, but the recent hype around WOM has brought on a surge in their focus on such practices, their prominence, and the creation of similar agencies. Some of the better-known among them have names with surreptitious, even nefarious connotations. BzzAgent and Girls Intelligence Agency conjure thoughts of dank alleyways and messages that self-destruct in 30 seconds. Tremor, the title given to Procter and Gamble's crew of WOM-creating consumers what to say. "Honesty of Identity" is tantamount, too: "Clear disclosure of moms and teens, connotes unsettling underground eruptions (or worse, lame Kevin Bacon flicks). And then there are the maliciously-named grassroots marketing agencies m80 and Ammo Marketing. Rather than simply implying the malign, these straight-shooters come right out and hit us with it.

Companies are not only outsourcing WOM campaigns to agencies like these; they're reorganizing their own internal structures, relying on in-house marketing execs to spearhead and manage WOM programs. The number of business cards handed out at ad industry networking events featuring titles like *VP of Social Media*, *Chief Evangelist* and *Head of Word of Mouth* is on the rise. (Believe it: these are actual job titles.)

In fact, as *Sales Pitch Society II* was being written in February 2006, marketing departments were seeking employees to help them get a handle on the WOM hype. As listed on job classifieds site Monster.com, office supply retailer Staples was hiring a brand manager to "research, develop and implement viral marketing programs like Bzz Agent and blogging." Nantucket Off-Shore, a purveyor of spice rubs for meat and froufrou French sea salt was looking for a consumer marketing assistant "to strengthen the company's relationship with its consumers, encouraging word-of-mouth and brand loyalty." And Upromise, a firm that offers reward incentives for college savings accounts, was on the lookout for a manager of online acquisition to run activities including "viral marketing, existing partner relationships, and word-of-mouth."

Today's execs can't boast any formal degrees in WOM marketing, but tomorrow's just might. This summer, undergrads at Northeastern University will have the opportunity to sign up for a course called *Special Topics in Organizational Communication: Word-of-Mouth, Buzz, and Viral Marketing Communication*. Taught by Dr. Carl, the class promises to introduce students to WOM marketing industry terminology, academic research on WOM, tracking and measuring WOM, as well as "Ethical controversies surrounding the industry: commercialization of chit-chat, undercover and stealth marketing, shilling."

Chances are Professor Carl will be listing WOMMA's Word of Mouth 101 paper in the required reading for his class. In their effort to formalize our conversations and interactions with their brands (and sell services, books and conferences), WOMMA and other marketers have defined several terms. WOMMA, for instance, defines *Word of Mouth Marketing* as "Giving people a reason to talk about your products and services, and making it easier for that conversation to take place. It is the art and science of building active, mutually beneficial consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-marketer communications."

The trade group distinguishes multiple subcategories of WOM marketing. It says *Evangelist Marketing* is "Cultivating evangelists, advocates, or volunteers who are encouraged to take a leadership role in actively spreading the word on your behalf." *Influencer Marketing* is "Identifying key communities and opinion leaders who are likely to talk about products and have the ability to influence the opinions of others." The two may seem like pretty much the same thing to you and me, but WOM marketers pen passionate screeds and hold late-night debates over this sort of thing.

BzzAgent's "PR guy," Joe Chernov counteracted the lack of understanding regarding the nuances of these whatchamacallit marketing efforts in his September 2005 post to the company's blog. He wrote, "[Reporters] seem surprised to hear that our competition isn't individual companies, but rather misconceptions about what word-of-marketing truly is and should be. The single greatest -- and most damaging -- misconception...is the confusion of essential terms."

He continued to define WOM as "the intended result" of Buzz Marketing and Viral Marketing. Buzz Marketing, he wrote, is "a public relations event or consumer experience

intended to 'create a splash' and 'get people talking.' " That, stressed Chernov, is different from *Viral Marketing*, which occurs "when marketers use individuals as a distribution channel for a marketing message."

*Just think:* you're no longer an individual, but a "distribution channel." Empowering, isn't it? This is a candid enough description that it almost seems like it should be socially acceptable, especially when glazed over by the distracting gloss of semantics.

Whatever the tactics used – evangelism, buzz, viral, blah, blah, blah -- the ultimate mission of WOM marketers is to insert their brands into our conversations. Considering the fact that in most cases, our conversations are the foundations upon which we build our relationships with one another, we shouldn't take it lightly.

## THE BOY WHO CRIED WOM

"I arrived in Denver late last night. I'm here on 4 day conference for work. Usually when I travel, my wife is the one who packs, and basically tells me which slacks go with what shirt/tie etc.... The suits are usually packed with the shirts/tie as well. This time my wife was home sick with the flu, so I had to pack for myself. Earlier in the week we had gone shopping at Dillard's, at the Villa Linda Mall in Santa fe. Since I was waiting for the head-to-toe campaign anyways I was curious about it, so my wife and I checked it out. It was a pretty easy set up. I've always said, "You get what you pay for" The quality is pretty good, not to mention pretty stylish. I did a little shopping with help from my wife. So when I packed yesterday morning, it was all pretty basic. This evening while we were having cocktails at the lounge, some of us fellas were chatting, getting to know one another. We brought up the packing situation, **so I figured it was my time to start Bzzzz**. I started telling them about the whole activity deal, and how I was dressed from head to toe in **BRAND X**. That it was a very good quality brand, easy to maintain, care for, and for men, the plus was, it was easy to color coordinate. They seemed pretty intrigued with the head-to-toe concept. They asked where they could go and I told them to talk to a salesperson, and she would hook them up. There seemed to be genuine interest. Hopefully they give **BRAND X** a try, they won't be disappointed. It was a comfortable fit the whole day long!"

-A report posted on the BzzAgent site from BzzAgent Ant43 (bolding added for emphasis)

At this point marketers can't directly surveil our in-person conversations. But they can do the next best thing by compiling reports from the people they've solicited to spread WOM. In the case of BzzAgent Ant43, he was chosen by BzzAgent to help promote a new line of Dockers men's clothing, which from his description sounds kinda like Garanimals for guys.

As part of the *Head-to-Toe* campaign, participants were given a "complete Dockers outfit for FREE — no obligations!" Well, except for one. The agency did ask those who donned the Dockers duds to "let us know when you've shared an opinion on the Dockers

line of men's clothing. When you do, you'll receive BzzPoints that you can redeem for rewards offered on our site."

Sounds like a good deal – free outfit, points for rewards. It's no wonder hundreds of thousands of people have signed up to participate in campaigns like those organized by BzzAgent and its ilk. But to prove a point, I Mad Lib-ified Ant43's original report by replacing his mentions of the brand name, "Dockers," with the phrase, BRAND X. Because, honestly, when I read his account, or other excerpts from BzzAgent reports, or ponder people's experiences participating in these types of campaigns, I can't help but wonder whether they would have said and done the same thing had another brand been behind the campaign. In this case, had Land's End or Gap or American Eagle or some other company been seeding their product to BzzAgent Ant43, would he decide it "was my time to start Bzzzz" about Land's End or Gap or American Eagle instead? Or if he hadn't been involved in a campaign, would he have raised the apparel issue at all?

Though BzzAgent certainly is not the only company in the business of engineering WOM, the firm's website is a trove of real-life, first-person accounts of people who sign up to participate in their campaigns. Here's another, this one about helping to promote Kellogg's Smorz Cereal from a school kid who goes by the BzzAgent handle, iworshipbees. (Granted, these are two of thousands submitted to BzzAgent, but they're also ones that have been highlighted by the company.)

"As I was abnormally excited as a result of signing up for this BzzActivity (it being my first after getting my welcome package a long time ago), I realized that I couldn't wait to receive my 12-box package in the mail, so I went out to the store and bought a box myself before school. In school, a few buddies of mine, and a few of their buddies (probably totalling about 12 people on average for each morning) just sit against the walls in the hallway across from our lockers. Often times, we don't have breakfast at home, so this one guy always brings a different box of cereal or Teddy Grahams to share (and is empty by 3rd period), and **I decided that maybe I should take his non-intentional approach**. So, I brought my box of Smorz into school excitedly and passed the box down the line for people to share.... A few said that they would get their moms to buy it for them

later. I'm pretty sure that it would be safe to assume that at least 5 people are going to have their moms buy the cereal. **I'm definitely going to buy a few more boxes and try it out on others in my school** as the box didn't last me more than half of first period. **I'm also excited to try it out on my family** tomorrow afterschool (hopefully I'll have a box left for them)."

Out of the mouths of babes.

I suppose if this kid's first "BzzActivity" were to talk up Fruity Pebbles or Double Berry Pop-Tarts, that's what the locker loiterers would have been influenced to nag their moms into buying. But, it was a Smorz campaign, so that's what he foisted on 'em.

Let's disregard the fact that this malleable-minded young person seems to equate participation in this campaign as a game of strategy in which his friends and family are targets. Whether grandmas or wee-ones are doin' it, the behavior prompted by these sorts of orchestrated WOM campaigns not only has implications regarding the credibility of the opinion or the message (which is what WOM marketers are concerned with), it has implications regarding the extent to which people are willing to allow advertisers to infiltrate their day-to-day interactions with those around them.

Although it's probably not common, rather than waiting for their free samples, both of these BzzAgents actually went out and purchased the products! It's as if they felt some sense of duty to support the advertisers both through conversation and actual purchases. When WOM disseminators intersperse WOM campaign brands into their dialog -- even when they don't buy the products -- they're allowing the advertisers behind those campaigns to influence their interactions. The advertisers may not be controlling what is said about the brand, or whether it's positive or negative, but they are indeed playing a strategic role in the decision to feature that brand in conversation.

As a result of this advertiser-inspired or so-called "amplified" WOM, self-expression increasingly is in danger of becoming brand-expression. I called this the "brand vessel" effect in the first Sales Pitch Society, suggesting that when people spread advertiser-engineered WOM (think of Ant43's "time to start Bzzzz"), they "become brand vessels,

sacrificing little pieces of themselves in exchange for a few fleeting benefits.... The irony is that, in most cases, the 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."

Sure, it's a little over-dramatic, but it gets the point across.

The WOM faithful will argue that it's not spin that their buzz messengers are spewing, but their own organic words and ideas. BzzAgent's definition of WOM ("People sharing opinions naturally between friends and among their social groups") is based on this premise.

But the logic is flawed. Of course the words themselves are natural to a certain degree. Like most of us do when we converse, participants in WOM campaigns probably individualize and adjust their words to best suit their environment, and more important, to best suit their WOM recipient. Indeed, to marketers, this is among the most desirable characteristics of WOM: it personalizes the brand message, unlike even the most well-targeted ads.

However, in campaigns like the ones run by BzzAgent and others, the presence of the brand in parlance is anything but natural, whether or not the opinions or ideas about the brand are. The impetus is the original brand-engineered campaign. Consider the basic process of these orchestrated WOM efforts:

1. The agency offers members of its WOM network the opportunity to participate in a campaign. The agency may match the brand's campaign mission to the most appropriate people, isolating those who fit criteria based on age, demographics, interests, self-described social status, and the like.
2. The WOM campaign participants are given sample products or engage in some sort of experience with the brand that they wouldn't have otherwise. (Maybe they're asked to invite their hip friends over for a cocktail party during which some new brand of hooch is served).
3. The participants may be provided with additional product information, campaign guidelines, and tips on how to spur WOM about the brand.

(People who signed up for BzzAgent's "BzzBlast" campaign for a downloadable toolbar called Loki received information about the product, a Code of Conduct card, and "Loki pass-along cards which you can use to remind your BzzTargets to download the free toolbar....")

4. The participants talk about the brand, both positively and negatively.
5. In some cases, the participants are asked to file a report describing their experiences with the brand, and reactions from conversation partners while discussing the brand.
6. The participants may receive a reward, beyond just the free product sample, for their services.

Would you use the terms "organic" or "natural" to describe this process?

As reported in a December 2004 *New York Times Magazine* feature profiling a handful of WOM minions, BzzAgent at the time charged \$95,000 for a 12-week campaign involving 1,000 agents. If WOM marketing campaigns were comprised merely of organic opinions shared naturally among people, they wouldn't have a \$40+ million dollar industry building up around them. They would just happen all on their own. Again, mentioning products we use or books we've read or bands we dig can be quite natural, even if it is inspired by a free sample or subway ad or drive-time radio show buffoonery. However, the fact that marketers are spending so much time and money to understand how to insert their brands into our thoughts, words and actions is an indication that this WOM stuff has become strategically-modified.

Considering the relatively low costs, and the promise of having people tailor brand messages on an individual level for optimum impact, it ain't surprising that marketers are pumping cash into campaigns that turn our once-mere conversations into "buzz," and sometimes, people into brand vessels. The December 2005 *Simultaneous Media Usage Survey* from BIGresearch showed that across all demographics, WOM had more influence on purchase decisions – more than TV, the Internet, magazines, articles, in-store promos, or any other medium.

Some WOM spreaders already speak the militaristic language that's been part of the ad industry lexicon for years. As indicated in one of the many report excerpts posted on the

BzzAgent site, some BzzAgents even refer to the people they spread “buzz” to as “BzzTargets,” just as the company does. Here’s Rascal\_robort, a “Top 10 BzzAgent” :

“As I neared the Top 10, I was excited and set my sights on bee-ing BzzAgent Numero Uno. I knew that I couldn’t casually wait for Bzz opportunities like I had in the past, but had to actively seek them out. I had a lot of success with family and friends, but now I had a better understanding of what it took to create Bzz and **hook a target** - influencing a person’s buying habits isn’t just as easy as bringing up a subject and diverting the conversation onto a book or other product. No, it required really finding out what made the product great and how to connect it to the **target’s** needs or experiences.”

Of course, terms like “orchestrated,” “engineered” or “manufactured” are not used by WOM marketing proponents. Most prefer to employ the term, “managed WOM,” to describe their influence on conversations. They also insist that tinkering with people’s expression is mere amplification or enhancement of what’s naturally occurring. Take BzzAgent’s Matt M., who wrote on the company’s blog in August 2005 that, “Managed WOM programs aren’t destroying our social fabric; when they are open and honest (like they all should be), they are just enhancing what is already there.”

In a study of WOM Agents participating in BzzAgent campaigns, Northeastern’s Dr. Carl analyzed differences in “institutional WOM” (or “buzz”) and “everyday WOM.” He defined “institutional WOM” as “WOM communication where the institutional identity or corporate affiliation of at least one participant may be salient and/or where the object being discussed (i.e., an organization, brand, product, or service) is part of an organized WOM campaign.” His research revealed that when engaged in everyday conversations that involved recommendations, agents made recommendations 70.8 percent of the time. However, when engaged in institutionalized or buzz conversations that involved recommendations, agents made recommendations 88.3 percent of the time. That’s nearly 18 percent more mentions of products, brands or services that assumably would not have been made if those WOM disseminators had not been part of a campaign.

As shared with me for Sales Pitch Society II, Carl gathered some other findings that complement this. He calculated that thirteen percent of the WOM episodes had been

planned ahead of time when they involved everyday WOM; i.e. when a brand or product was mentioned naturally rather than as part of a campaign. On the other hand, episodes involving institutionalized WOM, or those that were part of a campaign, were planned ahead of time 24 percent of the time. That's over 10 percent more often.

As noted in Carl's report: "The results of this study showed that when Agents were buzzing a product (I-WOM) they reported greater individual, conversational control than their everyday WOM. To the extent that this individual, rather than mutual, conversational control is perceived by the conversational partner, the sense of natural conversation may be undermined."

In more recent work, Dr. Carl found that 71 percent of the time agents were the ones who initiated WOM episodes. However, he stresses that they initiated WOM most of the time whether or not they were involved with a campaign. This more recent research also shows that most of the conversational partners, 60 percent, did not perceive the agents' control while 32 percent did.

So, in conjunction with "managed" WOM campaigns, brand- and product-centric discussions were pre-planned more often and brand and product references increased, and those participating in such campaigns reported that they exhibited more control over the conversations. Isn't it clear that these efforts are affecting the way people interact with one another? It seems anything but natural.

Sure, many companies today provide communication tools ("refer a friend" forms, community discussion forums, etc.) that enable already interested, possibly-loyal brand fans to readily share information about or recommend a brand. Send the latest Budweiser TV spot to a friend, Send your buddy a personalized SoBe ecard, Record your own Firefox testimonial: these kinds of things seem pretty harmless. However, I'd argue that the proliferation of such tools and features has helped acclimate people to sending and receiving branded messages when communications would otherwise be less-dominated by them.

The classic, and very overt marketing technique of friend referral, is ever-present in the online world because it's so damn easy to implement. Take this email message I got from FirePitShop.com after purchasing a...uh...fire pit...from the company:

"We hope you enjoyed shopping at FirePitShop.com. The biggest compliment you could pay to us is to send a message to your friends and family telling them about us...It's fast and easy to take advantage of this great offer - just click here, enter your referrals' emails and they will receive a great discount via an email announcement. PLUS, we'll send YOU a special offer . . . it's our way of saying thanks!"

This technique is so pervasive in the Web marketing world that it's become widely accepted by consumers. The thing is, if anybody submitted my email address to a company without my permission, he'd definitely move down a few ranks on my friend roster, whether I got a discount on a patio heater or not.

It's the prerogative of every company to assist brand devotees in spreading the word. In these viral, community-fostering efforts, as in so-called managed WOM campaigns, the onus is ultimately on the individual consumers. Do they want to help market the brand? It's up to them. Yet, as people become more comfortable with these seemingly insignificant advertiser-spawned encroachments into our relationships, acceptance of more insidious forms of manufactured WOM is bound to follow. Consider campaigns like the ones compelling kids to try out cereal marketing techniques on their schoolmates, or inspiring misguided brand lackeys to equate family time with target practice.

Not only can such campaigns taint our interactions with brand messages that may not have been there otherwise, the more engineered WOM for WOM's sake they create, the more the value of what might be true, from-the-gut opinion gets diluted. Here we have the classic fable retold for the 21st century: when the boy who cried WOM finally wants to alert people about a brand or product he truly appreciates, his message could be distrusted even if it is honest.

## **EVANGELISM IS EMPOWERMENT, LOYALTY IS CONTROL, INFLUENCE IS ALTRUISM**

"Your passion inspires us....On the road of life, there are passengers and there are drivers...and you are the alpha drivers."

A video message featuring a Volkswagen exec spouting this pandering hooley was sent by the automaker to VW fans whom the company deemed opinion leaders. In his discussion of the campaign at WOMMA's Basic Training Conference, Arnold Worldwide's Jamie Tedford flipped on the video so we could see for ourselves. VW's plea was straightforward: help the brand you love in its grassroots effort to influence people to buy Volkswagen. At times, the appeal took the non-conformist approach we've come to expect from Volkswagen. It assured viewers that, though they obviously exude discriminating taste by driving a VW, the company knows they're "not trying to impress anyone." Talk about shifting psychology into reverse.

The fact is that without willing participants, WOM campaigns would never get off the ground. In essence, the manufactured WOM effort is the mini-campaign, a mere catalyst intended to produce the larger WOM campaign. And that larger campaign is comprised not of TV spots or magazine ads or event sponsorships, but of the people themselves – the WOM spreaders.

As Jerry Seinfeld might put it, "Who ARE these people?" And better yet, why do they do it? Here's how aspiring BzzAgent Numero Uno Rascal\_robert explained it, according to his report featured on the BzzAgent site:

"[I]nfluencing a person's buying habits isn't just as easy as bringing up a subject and diverting the conversation onto a book or other product....As I got good, I began to appreciate the impact that I was having in shaping the buying habits of the people around me. The prizes are nice - I've been happily rewarded - but the noticeable influence on the purchases of family, friends, and colleagues is the real reason that I enjoy bee-ing a Bzzagent. They now ask me what I think, opening the door for new Bzz, and in some cases, the product is helpful to them, and they wouldn't have known about it otherwise, had I not brought it up. Bee-ing a Bzzagent has enabled me to reach out to people in ways that I hadn't before."

Sure, the material rewards may be the initial draw, but the addictive high derived from influencing those around him keeps this rascal comin' back for another bzz fix.

Companies like BzzAgent insist upon calling their campaign participants "volunteers." But the fact is, at least when it comes to BzzAgent, they are offered prizes and rewards (like "music, gift certificates, sports gear, movies and galley proofs of novels," according to the company's site) in addition to the free product samples they get. Still, as rascal\_robert's explanation indicates, the free stuff factor may not be especially important. In an interview for Sales Pitch Society II, Northeastern's Dr. Carl backed this up: "You can't underestimate the social rewards," he suggested.

Some WOM evangelists believe that giving away goodies is not the way to go. Stressed Ben McConnell on his Church of the Customer blog in January of this year, "Those who create incentive programs to spur word of mouth will lose."

So if the prizes aren't the main attraction, what is? In that same blog post, McConnell added, "All of the evidence so far indicates that the vast majority [of] evangelists and buzz-spreaders are motivated by altruism or recognition, not cash, points or prizes."

The 2004 New York Times Magazine feature on WOM disciples revealed the lure of WOM campaign participation. As noted in the article, even BzzAgent founder Dave Balter "did not count on the agents taking BzzAgent so seriously." Among the surprises for the WOM-trepreneur: "only about a quarter of the agents collect rewards, and hardly any take all they have earned."

In his own research of BzzAgents, Dr. Carl, too, has found that "A lot of [BzzAgents] don't redeem their points." BzzAgents are awarded points for submitting reports about conversations they've had for campaigns; they can trade them in for prizes, or donate a monetary equivalent to charity.

The ragtag bunch of buzzers profiled in The New York Times Magazine piece expressed reasons for participating in the company's campaigns that are similar to those determined by Carl and others: a feeling of superiority or privilege for knowing something others don't, a feeling of belonging, the thrill of propelling a brand to buzz stardom, and

the ability to help others by sharing information about products they may not know about otherwise.

A trendy 18-year-old member of the Tremor Crew of teens Janet Onyenucheya told author Rob Walker about her chance to preview the TV hit-to-be, *Lost*, which she proceeded to rave about to her friends. One wonders what she appreciated more: the show, or the perceived prestige engendered by seeing it before her peers did. In the story she explained, "I felt like I had the upper hand. Like, 'You don't know what I know.' "

BzzAgent Jason Desjardins got an ego boost of sorts through his involvement with campaigns promoting Bare Knuckle Stout, Al Fresco sausage, and a spam-blocking service called Mail-Block. "He figures he spends about 10 hours a week either buzzing or writing reports about buzzing," wrote Walker, who described Desjardins as more outgoing "partly because of his involvement in BzzAgent." If signing on with the agency helped Desjardins come out of his shell and feel more comfortable speaking with people, that's certainly a positive effect. The thing is, everyone is worthy of self-assurance without the need to derive some false sense of validation or confidence through mere brand affiliation.

This façade of status and privilege is in reality quite baseless. The power is derived not from any special personal qualities, but from the hollow glory of being chosen to promote products for little compensation. Although it's clear that payment for WOM campaign participation would prompt credibility concerns, compensation seems to be almost entirely limited to the empty privilege to promote the products.

WOM marketers insist that consumers' involvement in promoting their brands gives those consumers the upper hand. Yet, with the growing popularity of engineered-WOM, it's almost as though the people themselves are striving to be accepted by companies as worthy brand promoters. Even BzzAgent's Welcome Kit explains, "More often than not, our BzzCampaigns fill up very quickly, leaving many of you without the opportunity to participate."

No longer do people merely desire acceptance by other shallow materialists based on wearing hip garb, flaunting the latest gadgetry, or strategically dropping the right brand

names in conversation. They now seem to crave acceptance from the companies and products themselves! Where, precisely, is the power in that?

Wait a minute. Aren't marketers supposed to be wooing us, not the other way around?

It's as if being a part of this dubiously elite group of brand insiders is the draw, as opposed to membership being a means to another end. As Dr. Carl told me, "I get the sense that people want to be part of something. They want to have a sense of belonging.... I think that's why BzzAgent has become so successful and why many programs where companies have their own communities, like Lego communities and Harley Davidson communities [exist]. There's a sense of belonging."

There's no doubt that a sense of belonging is a component of membership in any group, be it The French Foreign Legion or the KISS Army. Communities, whether religious organizations, motorcycle clubs, political advocacy groups, amateur theater associations or chess teams, attract members with an interest in the activities or ideals each group represents. Those members often share information about those activities or ideals with others as a natural outward expression of who they are and what's important to them. Douglas Atkin, author of *The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers*, spoke about this at the WOMMA Basic Training conference. Being part of a group, he explained, even if the intent is merely to display what one eschews, is a self-defining thing. "The Mac has played a big role in helping me *not* conform," a Macintosh cult member told him.

Let's look at how this community appeal applies to being part of a WOM network. The sense of belonging derived from membership in a WOM community, like the BzzAgent network or the Tremor crew, is much more hollow. Like an empty vessel, it's waiting to be filled with meaning. It's waiting for the next product sample to be delivered, for the next guide explaining Brand X's positioning. Could it be that the sense of belonging comes not from any actual like-mindedness or shared behavior, but from a phony sense of community based on promoting, influencing and being among the first to know about Brand X Fill-in-the-Blanks?

What about the cult brands: the Harleys and the Macs and the Legos of the world? In cases like these, isn't there a sense of community? Yes, however, I'd argue that sense of

community comes not from the brand, but rather through shared interests. The mutual enjoyment of riding a motorcycle or a scooter or creating artwork helps bring together Harley Davidson bikers or Vespa riders or Mac users. The brand may help to congeal the group, giving them something to latch onto and help distinguish them from others. However, the brand itself, and all its related marketing messages, brand positioning and iconic logos: mostly window-dressing and reasons for wearing rare T-shirts bearing cryptic slogans nobody else gets.

Quality from one brand to the next can certainly vary, as can product design, appearance, services offered, value based on cost, etc. Such characteristics often prompt genuine WOM – the “everyday” kind that Dr. Carl talks about. Yet, even when there’s an honest opinion about a brand, the question remains: why are people so willing to insert brands into their conversations as part of a marketing campaign?

Many orchestrated-WOM campaigns involve brands and products the marketing minions have just been introduced to. Why would hundreds of people sign up to spread the word about a new line of apparel or a new brand of breakfast cereal they’ve just recently been exposed to?

“I think there’s also a sense that people enjoy being in the know, having access to things, kind of feeling like they’re on the inside of something. That’s important,” said Dr. Carl when I asked him why people participate in WOM campaigns.

BzzAgent Scarecrow, who’s assisted in the Lance Armstrong “Live strong Bracelets” WOM campaign, probably can relate. As featured on the BzzAgent site, he gushes, “I love to be apart of a new way of thinking, something that is so huge and growing more everyday. It to me is a sense of making and shaping the future of a great new idea. It is also great to be a part of a company that thrives and listens to what we have to say. It has in general become a big part of what I do and what I enjoy doing.”

Sounds like this guy’s drinkin’ the “consumer empowerment” Kool-Aid. In fact, he’s practically quoting the BzzAgent Code of Conduct which claims, “BzzAgents have power! As a BzzAgent you’re part of a movement of people influencing other people through word-of-mouth. You are participating in the next wave of marketing, which is about marketing *with* consumers as opposed to *at* them.”

One of the main WOM marketing mantras centers on how marketers are relinquishing control to consumers, giving them the power to communicate with companies and their brands in a transparent, democratic manner. No longer, they insist, must consumers play by the top-down, brand-controlled rules. Now they can tell the brand what they want.

WOMMA literature notes, "Word of mouth marketers don't have a choice. We can't do what we do unless consumers are happily willing to relay our message." It's true that without consumer involvement this whole WOM marketing thing is dead. However, The scam is that it's presented to consumers as something that we *need* marketers to help us accomplish. Who needs them? We've always had the freedom to express our opinions about their brands.

Sure, brand name products play a role in our daily lives, but most are not integral to our existence. Even now that brand marketers supposedly have granted us this magical power to define their brands, that doesn't mean their brands have to define *us*. Empty lives and vacant personalities long to be filled with something, and marketers are more than happy to supply the stuffing.

Call me crazy, but I don't want to talk about brands and products all the time, and I don't want my friends to, either. I don't want my emails or my blog to be cluttered with links to the latest gadget or designer handbag or homemade video dedicated to the greatness of Crest White Strips. I don't want my head to be clogged with what some "director of online community engagement" thinks I should know about his advertiser client's hair conditioner. I'd rather think about things that are actually relevant to my life outside of what I can buy.

Then again, the next time I experience an awkward moment of silence, I can always tell people about the new location-based search and navigation toolbar from Skyhook Wireless.

I expressed similar thoughts to the young WOM revolutionary I met at the WOMMA conference. I asked the aspiring WOM marketing entrepreneur why he thinks people are so willing to engage in marketing-driven brand blather. Possibly because I had the gall to question the merit of the golden WOM calf, he seemed taken aback by my inquiry. He

mulled it over for a moment. “Well,” he told me, “People don’t want to be walking around aimlessly. They need guidance.” His implication was that we need marketers to tell us how to live – what to wear, what to eat, what to covet. “People need *something* to talk about,” he shrugged.

Maybe it’s just a generational thing; maybe the brand embrace is for kids, teens, twenty-somethings. I asked Dr. Carl what he thought. He suggested, “Either the teens haven’t developed that skepticism yet, or it’s hitting something that makes them want to be involved – like the idea of being in the know and how easy it is to integrate it into their social networks.” He added, “When I talk about this with my students who are more traditional college-age, undergraduates (18-24)...there are certainly some people who want to call out the ethics on that, and say, ‘That’s just out of line.’ But a lot of students say, ‘Hey, that’s just how it is nowadays; that’s just kind of what [marketers] have to do with all the bombardment of messages.’ So, at one level, it’s just an acceptance that this is kind of where we are, and other people think, ‘It’s cool, it’s neat, how can I get involved?’”

The truth is that adults are into the WOM marketing thing, too. When Carl surveyed BzzAgents for his WOM research, 83 percent of them were female, ages 13 all the way up to 72. P&G has a WOM network for moms called Vocalpoint, too.

WOM agency Ammo Marketing touts its ability to get moms to push new ready-made mashed taters and mac ‘n’ cheese. According to a case study on its website, “Ammo recruited 60 Influencers in Indianapolis and St. Louis to act as Country Crock Side Dish ‘reps.’ Armed with the Side Dishes, our Moms served samples at their moms clubs and scrapbook parties, they contributed the Sides to PTA luncheons and church potlucks, and everywhere they went they raved about the Side Dishes’ homemade quality and convenience and how much their family loved them. They delivered a credible endorsement and product trial to an estimated 30,000 moms.”

Word of Mouth has it that Country Crock Garlic Mashed Potatoes make for a great scrapbooking glue substitute, too. *Mmm...pastey.*

Another factor Carl alludes to as a reason why people engage in WOM campaigns may be relevant in the Country Crock case. "I think there is a sense of altruism," he concluded. "We want to help people find information out and we want to help people avoid a negative experience. But then there's also the sense of altruism towards the company, wanting to help out the company."

Helping others wasn't a primary goal for Chris Barrett and Luke McCabe when they set out on their mission to become the first corporately sponsored college students in 2000. As it turned out, landing a sponsorship from First USA Bank had an altruistic component, though. Just over four years after I wrote about "Chris and Luke" in Sales Pitch Society, Barrett agreed to speak with me for SPSII. He described his sponsored student experience: "We thought we'd have to wear logos 24 hours a day and we'd be walking billboards for a company, and we really turned out to be spokesguys for a company. We got to promote a message of financial responsibility, really, instead of a brand which ended up being kind of nice."

As many do during college, Barrett seems to have changed quite a bit since his days as a wannabee campaign crusader. What did he think about people considering friends and acquaintances target audiences? "It's kind of scary," he responded. "I don't think it's right....I don't think I'd want to be a part of that anymore. A couple years ago I might have."

## THE NET EFFECT

Without the broad adoption of the Internet and the proliferation of digital communication, engineered-WOM marketing wouldn't be considered a viable industry. Yes, it is true that in his study of BzzAgents, Dr. Carl found that only about six percent of their WOM occurred online, through instant messaging, email, and Web chatrooms. (In fact, 77 percent took place face-to-face and 17 percent on the phone.)

The fact is, however, the Web is acting as a window into the world of WOM. Think of the Internet as a hub (or in BzzAgent's case, a "Central Hive") where WOM spreaders congregate. Not only do some marketers believe that what people say online reflects offline conversations; the Internet allows for never-before-possible tracking, aggregation and measurement of WOM (both the honest-to-goodness kind and the marketer-inspired kind).

For one thing, if it weren't so easy to sign-up online with BzzAgent or Tremor or other WOM marketing agencies, it's doubtful there would be legions of registered buzzers out there willing to do their bidding. To be sure, the Web affords WOM marketers the ability to readily obtain reports from their marketing minions regarding their WOM experiences. It also enables measurement firms like Nielsen Buzzmetrics to sift through information referencing brands that is posted by people on blogs, forums, chatrooms and product review sites.

It's this intricate traceability that excites marketers. They've always wanted to know what we've been saying about the stuff they sell, and now they have an unprecedented ability to track it, compile it, and put it to use. Of course, this can be a good thing in that it allows them to learn about what people think of their products and adjust them to better suit consumer desires.

BuzzMetrics president and CEO, Jonathan Carson, explained buzz tracking in a December 2005 OMMA Magazine article:

"[The study of online consumer buzz] starts with sophisticated search software and linguistic algorithms that passively monitor the billions of

naturally occurring conversations on blogs, online message boards, public e-mail groups, and consumer-ratings Web sites....Media researchers are already tapping this data to understand how messages resonate through media, permeate conversation, and impact attitudes and behaviors of key audiences. TV network executives study online buzz to understand why viewers become passionate about certain programs. And sophisticated media planners track this buzz to make smarter investments for their clients."

When people really dig a clothing brand or motor oil or restaurant, the presence of it in their discussions is entirely natural and legitimate. Surely much of the WOM that companies like BuzzMetrics study is natural and not part of any WOM marketing effort. The truth is marketers see all of that stuff we post online as a goldmine. They can learn from it to improve their marketing strategies, and sometimes use it to refine products (not a bad thing).

In media and marketing industry circles all that commenting and sharing and posting often is referred to as Consumer Generated Media or Citizen Generated Media. New media pundits laud the CGM phenomenon as a grassroots coup. The people are taking the reins. Citizen journalists and bloggers are sticking it to the once all-powerful mainstream media. Sites like online encyclopedia Wikipedia let people add their insights regarding topics they have expertise in. Digital photo forums like Flickr allow people to easily present images to the world that are important to them. Social networking sites like MySpace give us the means to share music, express personal interests, meet new friends and find old ones. Online product reviews on BizRate and Amazon give us a forum for airing our grievances about products, or singing their praises.

Marketers view CGM as a marketing opportunity, an organic, communal forum in which to disseminate their brand messages in an unobtrusive manner. For one thing, the messages are customized by individuals spreading them, so they can be integrated into natural parlance almost seamlessly. Oh, and don't forget: exploiting this new CGM stuff is much cheaper than many other forms of marketing or advertising.

Most important of all, commented BuzzMetrics's Carson in an August 2005 interview with

iMediaConnection, “word-of-mouth no longer dissipates as it often does when a traditional water-cooler or over-the-fence discussion ends. You can now study it. You can find the people driving it. You can participate in it. This is a revolutionary idea.”

iMediaConnection editor, Dawn Anfuso, followed, “How can marketers take advantage of it?” Responded Carson, “Marketers can absolutely participate in this channel. They can influence the way people talk about them, they can impact their word of mouth or create buzz.”

That “channel” he’s referring to, essentially, is *us* – our words, our interactions, our relationships.

The growing ease and accessibility of tools for creating CGM and places for distributing it is facilitating consumer-to-consumer marketing. That means marketers no longer have to woo consumers to hum-ad land; they’re coming on their own accord.

In recent years, brand devotees have created blogs dedicated to Netflix, Barq’s rootbeer, Trader Joe’s, Starbucks and McDonalds. One of the most famous altruistic ad men is school teacher, George Masters, who brought tears of joy to marketers’ eyes through his 60-second animated iPod spot. According to a December 2004 *Wired News* article, Masters posted the ad to his site, and as soon as the blogosphere caught wind of it, it attracted thousands of viewers. Masters told *Wired*, “I did it for fun.... I love motion graphics. I like creating visuals.”

Sensing a blossoming trend, marketers have leaped to action, devising ways to spur consumer generated marketing. A popular means of enticing people to become volunteer ad creative directors has been the create-your-own-ad contest. Mozilla got Firefox fans to submit homemade ads and songs promoting the Web browser, offering a grand prize of a multimedia multi-screen display device, a PC or a \$5,000 gift certificate to a photo and video store.

Converse solicits short films from mini-movie makers “inspired by the values of Converse, namely authenticity, originality and creativity” for viewing at [ConverseGallery.com](http://ConverseGallery.com). Using the ever-popular anti-corporate reverse psychology method, the shoemaker instructs

filmmakers to “leave the catchy slogans to the ad guys.” The movies culminate with Converse branding, and of course, are easy to “send to a friend.”

A winning slogan in Ban Deodorant's 2005 *Ban It!* contest submitted by Becky C. of Park Forest, Illinois was redolent of irony. Her tagline *Ban Labels* “shows that we should ban labels and judgments based on clothing or hair,” wrote Becky. Evidently judgments based on body odor are acceptable. But I digress. The true irony lies in Becky's confused creation of an anti-label slogan -- to promote a deodorant label!

The underarm protector also allows people to participate in a CGM-fueled storytelling campaign in which users add to a tale and pass it along to a friend to continue it. Here's how Ban starts off the sales serial: “So I woke up in a sweat last night because I had this really random dream.” The goal is to get consumers (the campaign's young female target audience) to contribute to and pass along a never ending story that must be viewed on the Ban website, where they can be fully immersed in the Ban brand experience.

Talk about a marketer's wet dream.

Willful brand promotion is “a sign that consumers want to have a role in promoting a product they love,” suggested Steve Rubel, then VP at PR agency CooperKatz, in the Wired piece about the iPod ad man. Rubel added, “There's a real trend toward consumer-generated media. People are creating news, they're blogging. People will create marketing as well. This guy [iPod ad man Masters] is a great example.”

The question is, can we equate brand-based CGM to idea-based CGM? In other words, can concepts or creations that arise from our own life experience, interactions with others and beliefs about the world be thought of on the same level as brand concepts developed merely to sell cars, hamburgers and shampoo? I'd like to think ideas outside the sphere of branding are bigger and far more meaningful.

In a post entitled *Outsourcing ads to your customers*, Church of the Customer blog author Jackie Huba put it bluntly, “Who needs ad agencies when creative people at home have Macs and iMovie?”

Indeed. Just search for commercials on the popular Web video sharing site, YouTube, and among the bizarre Japanese TV spots and silly old '80s ads, there's a host of homemade commercials to be found. As to be expected, some are parodies, or ads produced for school assignments. Yet some are honest-to-goodness product pitches.

Consider the embarrassingly bad Sprint commercial by "naturallyawesom3." The comment posted with the video says it all: "just a basic commercial i was bored, and thats my phone." Other equally skill-less spots for Gatorade and Tommy Hilfiger lead one to ponder why some WOM marketing proponents actually want to encourage the growing throngs of inept cell-phone film hacks to make D.I.Y. ads.

Taking a cue from sponsored college kids Chris and Luke, *organicallygreen* auctioned off a "citizen marketing" service on Ebay, promising "For 1 year, I will preach the sermon that your product is the be-all, end-all, one of a kind, can't live without product of the century." Some in the WOM marketing industry panned *organicallygreen*'s blatantly mercenary pitch.

*Organicallygreen* is not alone in using the term "citizen marketer;" it's actually used throughout the commercial WOM marketing world. But swapping "citizen" for what's more appropriate in this case, "consumer," is disingenuous. It paints WOM marketing in a non-commercial light, positioning it as some kind of civic service. There's a righteous sense of patriotic duty implied, a calling. I picture the brave *citizen marketer* hoisting a flag emblazoned with the Coca Cola logo, or lowering it when he sees his friend drinking Pepsi.

*Ad Age* critic and co-host of NPR's *On The Media*, Bob Garfield, described the impact CGM is having on WOM marketing in his October 2005 *Ad Age* piece, *Inside the New World of Listenomics*. He encapsulated the CGM zeitgeist well:

"And that native authenticity is out there, like Arctic oil, just waiting to be tapped. Pitiful as this may sound, there are people all across this great nation of ours who give immense amounts of thought to, for instance, the Whopper Jr. They're not in it for the money, either. They just plain care.....This is a category of consumer, obviously, that has always existed.

Only now, with the Internet, it's easy for them to find one another. And everybody else."

## **MARKETERS BEHAVING BADLY**

"I don't think you can fuck this up...unless you behave badly."

Bob Garfield made this declaration during his address at WOMMA's Basic Training conference. By behaving badly, he was referring in part to WOM marketers conducting covert operations in which participants don't reveal their affiliation with a campaign.

Last October, anti-ad group Commercial Alert sent a missive to the Federal Trade Commission contending that some companies "are perpetrating large-scale deception upon consumers by deploying buzz marketers who fail to disclose that they have been enlisted to promote products." The organization requested an investigation to "determine whether buzz marketers are engaging in deceptive practices in violation of the FTC Act, and issue guidelines so that buzz marketers may clearly understand what the law is."

WOMMA soon issued a counter-statement, insisting "that any relationship between consumers and marketers be clearly disclosed from the beginning. We also think that disclosure makes messages more powerful, because it makes them more trustworthy." By December, WOMMA reps had met with the FTC to brief the commission on the industry and its ethical standards.

Northeastern's Dr. Carl surprised many in the industry when he released a study concluding that disclosure of campaign affiliation could improve WOM campaign success.

In his January 2006 *To Tell Or Not To Tell* report, Carl notes,

"For about 5% of the conversational partners who were not aware of the agent's affiliation with the marketing organization there was a negative 'backlash' effect when they found out.... There were virtually no negative feelings, however, when the conversational partner was aware of the agent's affiliation."

That's right. Just five percent of people were pissed off when they learned their friends and family discussed brands with them as part of a WOM marketing campaign. In fact, Carl found that:

“For approximately 75% of the conversational partners (the people with whom the word-of-mouth marketing agents engaged in word-of-mouth communication) it did not matter that they were talking with someone affiliated with a marketing organization. Instead what mattered was that they trusted the agent was providing an honest opinion, felt the agent had their best interests at heart and were providing relevant and valuable information.”

Not only did they not care; Carl revealed that “the pass-along/relay rate (the number of people a person told after speaking with a word-of-mouth marketing agent) was actually higher when the conversational partner was aware they were talking with a participant in an organized word-of-mouth marketing program.”

This finding seems to defy logic. Yet Dr. Carl has an explanation. When I spoke to him for SPSII, he concluded that conversational partners see disclosure as a “marker of honesty.” He added, “When you're aware that it's part of a campaign, there must be some reason.... It must be something that's interesting, or they wouldn't have [a campaign], so you tell others.”

In the end, Commercial Alert's disclosure demand would have little effect on the growing number of willing brand disciples who have no qualms about enabling the commercial contamination of their relationships. The notion that consumers are victims in need of government protection from buzz marketing denies the simple fact that it's those very consumers spreading the branded word who allow the existence of such schemes in the first place.

Despite these findings, and WOM industry self-policing, WOM spreaders ultimately have the freedom to choose whether or not they disclose campaign affiliation. As featured in the 2004 New York Times Magazine feature on buzz marketing minions, BzzAgent Karen Bollaert admitted that (at least at the time) she didn't disclose her agent status. "It just

seems more natural, when I talk about something, if people don't think I'm trying to push a product," she said in the story. BzzAgent has since changed its ethics code to require disclosure.

## CONCLUSION

Media pundits and Internet evangelists often refer to the rise of CGM and WOM marketing as a revolutionary uprising of consumers toppling the brand tyrants.

In reality, it's the ultimate score for marketers. Companies may have less ability to control their brand messages; however, the fact is that by willingly engaging in orchestrated WOM campaigns, people are condoning the deliberate injection of brands into their conversations. In essence, people are facilitating their own exploitation, merely because marketers have asked them to.

Disregard the obvious reasons for this brand bootlicking: empty lives, the desire for belonging, acceptance and insider knowledge, even sheer materialism. Consumer attitudes are shifting, WOM is becoming institutionalized, and CGM is proliferating. At the intersection of these phenomena is digital communication.

The constant connectivity and immediacy enabled by email, instant-messaging, mobile phones, and other digital media are so rapidly altering the way we communicate, there seems to be little time to sit back and contemplate the effect on our relationships. Anyone who's ever received a hateful email written in the heat of passion, sent an instant message to a co-worker sitting three feet away, text-messaged one friend while sitting at dinner with another or had a discussion partner answer a cell phone call without as much as an "excuse me," will understand what I'm getting at.

These attitudinal changes, combined with a steady increase in viral marketing gimmicks and accessibility of tools enabling easy creation and dissemination of branded messages has softened some of us to the point where sending what amounts to an ad to a friend doesn't seem strange at all. It's just a fun way to kill time.

Could it be that all these sterile forms of communication are clouding our ability to see one another as in-the-flesh people who deserve respect? Do we forget sometimes that there's a human being on the other end of that message, not just a computer screen or mobile device? In some ways, the digital communication we praise for its potential to

bring us closer together sometimes actually divides us. It's as though some of us have allowed the media we use to transfer our thoughts and enable our discussions to build their own barriers.

If this communication commodification has indeed become acceptable to people, it's little wonder the Sales Pitch Society is thriving.

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