

From Word of Mouth to Word of Mouse Or: Are your brands best served by gossip?

Even before appearing in court for alleged plagiarism, author Dan Brown topped the bestseller list with four of his novels. An editor of a leading Belgian newspaper suggested that this was not the effect of marketing efforts but rather of word of mouth promotion.

*Word of mouth, a Babel-like — or should we say, semiotic — confusion of tongues? In English, one says *word of mouth*, which simply means verbally. In Dutch, it's *mond-tot-mondreclame* or advertising from mouth to mouth. Is publicity really passed on from mouth to mouth? Like a kiss? The French say *de bouche à oreille*, from mouth to ear. They define it as *sans intermédiaire, sans publicité*. For the French, there is absolutely no question of publicity in this method: they rule out any marketing angle.*

Words are certainly the oldest form of advertising. Even in Pompeii, people knew all about advertising, which used words on the walls of houses. Not only boards on restaurants and signposts pointing to brothels but also political messages. Indeed, just before the devastating eruption of Vesuvius, elections had been announced. So the politicians did not only harangue the crowds in the forum, they also were the subject of gossip, by *word of mouth*.

Now that we are bombarded with a constant barrage of marketing, the question is whether there is any sense in *word of mouth* advertising. Or is there more sense in it now? One thing is certain: *word of mouth* publicity is no longer seen as an alternative marketing instrument: it has been snapped up by marketers and is simply referred to in their marketing toolbox as *WoM*.

Marketers, of course, have relevant things to say about the use of *word of mouth* advertising. This is how George Silverman describes it on the Market Navigation Inc. website: *A major tool in helping our clients' products win is our expertise in developing word of mouth campaigns. Word of mouth is the most powerful force in the marketplace, and it can be harnessed in dozens of ways to multifold the sales of deserving products and services.*

"Dozens of ways"? Silverman sees *word of mouth* in face-to-face discussions at focus groups, or over the telephone, or on-line; chatter basically, but under the supervision of the

marketing agency. However, *word of mouth* publicity is difficult to control; it is almost a contradiction in terms.

The essential thing we can learn from this is that above all else, *word of mouth* must bring together kindred spirits so that it should work "without resistance". Not as words but like water off a duck's back. In this sense, *word of mouth* that is not directed by marketing is stronger and more efficient.

We could also twist things around. It is kindred spirits and not marketing that prime *word of mouth*. Its persuasiveness does not lie in the product but in the fact that people want to belong — or not. There are indeed people for whom *word of mouth* acts just the other way round. Because of the hype, people want to distance themselves. *Word of mouth* can work only with products or ideas that contain strong elements of "belonging" and not with products or ideas from which one wants to dissociate oneself. The *word of mouth* product levels down; it is safe, too safe.

From Word of Mouth to Word of Mouse

Meanwhile, a new form of *word of mouth* has cropped up: *word of mouse*. The expression is already included in the Internet dictionary *WordSpy* and defined as *communication via computer-based means, such as e-mail, chat rooms, or newsgroups*. Jon Zilber first used the expression in 1991 in the (also electronically accessible) magazine *MacUser*. He wrote: *"You really need to look beyond the mice to decide which product is best for you. And although we sometimes like to feel that we're the last word on the subject, we encourage you to check out other sources of information about the products you're interested in; seek out word of mouth to complement word of mouse."*

Since then the expression *word of mouse* has become at least as important as *word of mouth*. Six years later Steven Levy wrote this in *Newsweek*: *"The history of the Internet so far has shown that cyberspace is a bottom-up phenomenon. Trends are passed along by word of mouse — not passed down from summits."*

All this information and all these trends are now being summed up in one name: *computer-generated media* or CGM. Pete Blackshaw, chief marketing and customer

satisfaction officer at BuzzMetrics, writes the following about it — on-line of course: “*Unlike paid media, CGM is created by consumers. [That is why CGM is often also rendered as Consumer-Generated Media.] It’s often inspired by relevant product or service experiences and is frequently archived online for readers’ convenience and other consumers or key marketplace influencers. Examples of CGM include blog entries, consumer e-mail feedback, message board posts, forum comments, personal Web sites, and personal e-mail.*”

CGM too can be controlled by marketers. Through tagging, consumers’ messages are more readily recovered. The trail they leave on the Internet gives marketers the possibility to check on their products and brand names — and hope the messages are not negative, because when *word of mouse* is on the run, it cannot easily be stopped. You can try to make a mouse run but have to take the risk it runs the wrong way.

Word of mouse and brand awareness — brands carried by conceit?

Indeed, the question is whether brands — or products, or companies — can be carried along or helped by *word of mouth* or *word of mouse*. In fact, *word of mouth* is nothing more than gossip and *word of mouse* is upgraded (and more generalised) gossip. *Word of mouth* is — just like a secret — passed from person to person.

Word of mouse — and just about all forms of CGM — works differently. *Word of mouse* does not travel from person to person but to numerous persons — or should we say “impersonal” persons. Besides, they are “impersonal readers”, not listeners. Therefore, *word of mouse* has less power (of persuasion). Also, it is less attractive to the propagator. He or she is not instantly rewarded. As a result, *word of mouse* or CGM is generally less satisfactory.

An example: Some companies give visitors to their website the opportunity to react through e-mail, forums and blogs. This is not only a sort of *word of mouse* but may also mirror *word of mouth*. What the visitors leave on the site may be the reflection of what they have told friends and acquaintances or heard from them.

In this way, the company may also know what is being said by *word of mouth*. However, can the company react to that or use it?

We already suggested that *word of mouth* is difficult to control. What can companies do then?

What can companies do?

Word of mouse can trigger *word of mouth*. Companies can offer to send electronic newsletters to visitors of their website. In these letters the company will give its readers background information and all kinds of petty facts that could be transmitted verbally — by *word of mouth* — as “did you know that...” Such information also boosts the ego of those who transmit it *de bouche à oreille*.

Companies must provide complementary confidential information. They must release — i.e., literally reveal — such information, which can then lead its own life in the realm of *word of mouth*. The consequences are difficult to predict but it may be worth a try.

Sometimes the product itself is the information. If we consider the *Da Vinci Code* as one of the products of the Dan Brown Company, Inc., we can use it as an example. “Did you know that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child?... And that... And here is the evidence...” This means that you have to read the book — i.e. use the product — and this is why there is *word of mouth* publicity. The result is a sort of gossip, an urban legend.

Does this mean that less spicy and more proper information has less of a chance to be transmitted by *word of mouth* or *word of mouse*? It could look that way but nothing is farther from the truth. Gossip — despite its definition of “unverified twaddle” — must not be untruthful or incorrect. By definition, gossip must be unverified and unverifiable. On the other hand, *word of mouth* and *word of mouse* are more or less predictable.

Companies can turn this to their advantage. They can spin information as so many yarns; someone is likely to make a legend from it, an urban legend.

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