# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

**Opening the Black Box of Buzzing Bloggers: Understanding How Consumers Deal With the Tension Between Authenticity and Commercialism in Seeded Word of Mouth Campaigns**

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Word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing has gained ground as a powerful communication tool. One way in which marketers tap into consumers' WOM potential is by seeding products to influencers. These consumers take on a dual role, being both target and agent in the WOM episode. Because of cultural contradictions between the roles of consumer (authenticity) and marketer (commercialism), this dual role is likely to cause tension. This paper examines how consumer-agents and final target consumers deal with this duality by means of a netnographic study and experiments.

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# What Drives Word of Mouth: A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective

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## SESSION OVERVIEW

Word of mouth (WOM) has long been regarded an important, but hard-to-manage market force. Katz and Lazersfeld (1955) list word of mouth as the most influential source of information for consumers, and since then studies repeatedly found the importance of WOM. Faced with a rapid decline of consumer trust in traditional advertising, companies are looking for different ways to promote their products, and word-of-mouth marketing has gained ground as a powerful communication tool. Lately, practitioner interest in WOM has surged, as demonstrated by the launch of the word-of-mouth marketing association (WOMMA), and the rise of companies such as *BzzAgent* in the USA, and *Buzzer* in The Netherlands.

Researchers have examined the process by which WOM spreads and influences people at the individual level (e.g., Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991) or between consumers (e.g., Reingen and Kernan 1986). Ryu and Feick (2007) examined how marketers can use incentives to stimulate word of mouth. Some of the more recent studies have focused on online word of mouth because this medium allows researchers to better track the process (e.g., Godes et al. 2005).This symposium focuses on the factors that drive people to spread word of mouth. Although this issue has been touched upon in prior work, we believe it deserves additional attention, and have collected a set of papers that focuses on (1) product-related drivers of WOM, (2) marketer-created drivers of WOM, and (3) consumer-related drivers of WOM. Each of the papers represents multiple studies and together they provide substantial coverage of the wide array of factors that motivate consumers to talk about products. At the conference, the papers were discussed by Professor Donald Lehmann of Columbia Business School.

## EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

### "The Different Roles of Product Originality and Usefulness in Generating Word of Mouth"

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While studies agree that word of mouth (WOM) is important to new product success, there has been little systematic research that examines the drivers of WOM, in this context. In this paper we explored how the two dimensions of a new product, originality and usefulness, affect WOM and its influence on ultimate adoption. We showed that, contrary to what some have suggested (e.g. Cooper 1979; Henard and Szymanski 2001; Mishra, Kim, and Lee 1996), originality does not increase product sales, but it enhances the buzz about the product. Usefulness, on the other hand, drives the valence of WOM, i.e., whether the buzz is positive or negative. Thus, high originality accompanied by low usefulness is likely to increase amount of negative WOM, and lead to rapid failure. We report three studies that empirically explore our theses about how originality and usefulness influence the amount and valence of WOM about a new product, and how this in turn affects market size.

Research shows that more original new products elicit greater levels of WOM than less original products (e.g. Bone 1992; Feick and Price 1987). But originality will not generate only positive WOM. Originality is likely to lead to feelings of surprise, which can

lead to both positive and negative WOM (Derbaix and Vanhamme 2003). Thus, while increasing originality may lead to increasing levels of WOM, the valence of the WOM can also be negative. If so, contrary to what has been implied in the past (e.g., Henard and Szymanski 2001), originality alone may not be sufficient to ensure product success. The valence of WOM may be determined by product usefulness: Research shows that useless products are evaluated poorly and are highly correlated with failure (Dahl, Chattopadhyay, and Gorn 1999; Mishra et al. 1996). Several studies have also found that high product performance generates positive WOM (Derbaix and Vanhamme 2003; Dichter 1966; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster 1998), while product malfunction generates negative WOM (Anderson 1998; Sundaram et al.1998).

We therefore hypothesize that product originality will lead to high amount of WOM, while high product usefulness will lead to positive WOM and low product usefulness will lead to negative WOM. Since originality and usefulness have different roles in generating WOM, an increase in usefulness will increase positive WOM, especially for original products, and a decrease in usefulness will increase negative WOM, especially for original products. We therefore expect to see an interaction between originality and usefulness on the valence of WOM. Taken together, these hypotheses run counter to current thinking, which suggests that originality per se can drive new product success (Henard and Szymanski 2001; Mishra, Kim, and Lee 1996). They qualify the accepted wisdom by suggesting that originality, when combined with low usefulness, may produce strong negative WOM, leading to new product failure.

If indeed the suggested product dimensions, originality and usefulness, motivate consumers to spread WOM, their effect should be evident in product diffusion patterns. If originality increases the amount of WOM, it will also intensify the Bass imitation coefficient (Bass 1969), which represents WOM in the adoption process. Product usefulness, on the other hand, will create positive WOM that will increase market size. The combination of high originality and high (low) usefulness will increase (decrease) sales dramatically.

In order to show the different roles originality and usefulness play in the creation of WOM, we conducted five studies: Study 1 measured perceived product dimensions and WOM intentions of 20 new products, as rated by 226 MBA students. Results supported that originality increase amounts of WOM, including positive and negative WOM, while usefulness affected the valence of WOM by increasing positive WOM and decreasing negative WOM. We also found the interaction between originality and usefulness. These results were replicated in Study 2, which used a 2X2 between subjects design and manipulated the originality and usefulness of the products. Study 3 used a similar design as Study 2 to explore the effect of originality and usefulness on perceived likelihood of product success. We found that consumers believed that product usefulness will lead to success while product originality had no direct effect. Originality, however, can amplify the effect of usefulness. Studies 4 and 5 used sales data to reaffirm that originality and usefulness have different roles in the diffusion of innovation. As we hypothesize, we found that originality increases the imitation Bass coefficient (WOM), while usefulness, by determining the valence of WOM, affects market size and, thus, product success. We did not

find the interaction between originality and usefulness on market size, possibly because we did not have low usefulness products in the data.

The literature in marketing claims that in many cases WOM is crucial to product success, as are originality and usefulness. It is therefore interesting to understand how these dimensions affect WOM and, thus, product success, and consequently learn how marketers can manage WOM to their advantage. We showed that originality and usefulness have different roles in generating WOM and in determining whether a product will be successful. While previous studies extensively examined these two dimensions separately, for the first time we explored a detailed model of (1) the two dimensions together and the interaction between them, (2) their effect on both positive and negative WOM, and (3) the consequent effect on product success. We looked at the model from the intention to spread WOM as reported by consumers, and how they are reflected in actual sales of products.

### "Opening the Black Box of Buzzing Bloggers: Understanding How Consumers Deal with the Tension between Authenticity and Commercialism in seeded Word of Mouth Campaigns"

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Faced with a rapid decline of consumer trust in traditional advertising, companies are looking for different ways to promote their products. Consumers are no longer seen as mere recipients of marketing messages, but they are increasingly solicited by companies to participate in the conception and spread of these messages. Hence, word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing has gained ground as a powerful communication tool. The strength of WOM as opposed to marketer-generated messages is that consumers are considered to have no commercially motivated reason to share information (e.g., Bone 1992). However, how is the transmission of information between consumers affected when companies induce some to act as WOM agents? In terms of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright 1994), these consumers take on a dual role, being both target and agent in the WOM episode. This duality is likely to cause internal and external pressures due to cultural contradictions between the roles of consumer and marketer–the ultimate question being: Is it an authentic recommendation or is one selling-out?

This paper takes a holistic, macro perspective to examine how consumers deal with this duality. We use the method of netnography to study a product-seeding campaign involving bloggers. Observations, over time, of what bloggers write about product and campaign, as well as analyzing their readers' comments, allows for a deep contextualization of how consumers perceive, and deal with marketer-induced WOM. Specifically, we are interested in the strategies that consumer-agents use to reconcile their credibility as an authentic consumer with their role of agent acting on behalf of the company.

We use data of a product-seeding campaign that took place in the summer of 2006 in six Canadian cities. Ninety bloggers, selected for their wide readership and urban lifestyle, received a mobile camera phone with accessories and tutorial. Bloggers in the sample are between 22-45 years old; 41% is female. Among them, we find photographers, graphic designers, writers, software programmers, consultants, and administrative personnel. We collected integral blog entries of all 90 bloggers from approximately three months prior to seeding, to approximately three months after. Our total research volume amounts to circa 2000 pages of single-spaced text and visual data. In first instance, our content analysis has focused on the blog entries surrounding the moment of seeding. We have amassed, coded, compared, and collapsed postings to form categories of strategies that consumer-agents employ to deal with the tension between credibility and commercialism (cf., Spiggle 1994). To further our understanding of seeded WOM, we also compared data in each category with other postings in our dataset in which bloggers engage in 'natural' WOM.

Although bloggers were not obliged to talk about the seeded product, 84% mention it on their blogs. Preliminary analysis of our netnographic data reveals that the majority of bloggers is open about the fact that they received the product for free. However, disclosure is framed in various ways, indicating different strategies of coping with the duality of being consumer and marketer. Some bloggers make a statement like the following: "About a month ago, I received a free X phone. [..] I was asked to blog about my experience with the phone–what I liked and didn't like" (Lucia). Others give full information about the seeding campaign, oftentimes including links to the companies involved, and listing the requirements used to qualify as influencer. Whereas the first strategy accepts the dual role as a 'fait accompli', the second seems to be driven by two emotions: excitement and discomfort. Part of the bloggers is delighted to have been selected for the seeding campaign and to receive an (expensive) product for free: "I am thrilled to say that I am qualified! So look for reviews, photos, and videos (!!!) starting sometime next week taken on my new shiny X" (Jeremy). They happily embrace their role as marketer, and communicate details about the campaign to help their readers apply for a free product too. However, others feel the need to explain the campaign and their involvement: 'I am thankful I met the criteria, and it worked out perfectly as I was just starting to look for a new phone as well. It is all voluntary, no obligation or contracts. I don't have to do any of this, but since I usually write reviews like this anyways, I have no problem writing a voluntary review as thanks for getting a phone and gear for free, and I'll even be impartial about it." (Blaine). Consumers like Blaine show implicit discomfort with their dual role: campaign details are given to imply that one has nothing to hide. Finally, there are consumers that ridicule their role as agent: "I rarely initiate conversations about the phone, but when they start, oh then I go into celly-love gushing mode. [..] This all sounds like a carefully crafted product placement, doesn't it? I told you, I am an advertiser's dream" (Paige).

Thus, most consumer-agents *accept*, *embrace*, *ridicule*, or *apologize* for their role as semi-marketer. A few *ignore* this role vis-à-vis their readers by mentioning the product, but not the seeding campaign. Our analysis indicates that strategies are chosen for their effect on blog readers.

### "Talk, Talk, Talk: Consumer Motives for Word-of-Mouth Referral"

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Word of mouth (WOM) has long been regarded as an important influence on consumer behavior. Interest in this area has recently surged, as evidenced by recent studies of, among others, Ryu and Feick (2007), East et al. (2007), and Godes et al.(2005). Most of these studies, as well as the more classic work have looked at the effectiveness of word of mouth, examining the process by which WOM spreads and influences people at the individual or market level. In this paper we focus on the question of why people engage in word of mouth. We felt there was a need for an extensive study that examines consumers' motives for word of mouth and relates these to different aspects of WOM behavior, and to con-

sumer personality characteristics such as opinion leadership and market mavenism. Our study focuses on positive word of mouth (also known as "referral"), and does not look at negative word of mouth (cf., Goldenberg, Libai, Moldovan and Muller 2007).

In a first study, we conducted about two-hundred face-to-face interviews with consumers in The Netherlands, applying the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). We asked these consumers to describe a recent instance in which they referred a service to another consumer. We also asked the consumers why they referred this particular service to the other consumer, and what triggered their referral. Interviews typically lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and coded by four independent coders, following standard procedure for CIT studies: Two coders developed a coding scheme on half of the data, and then two independent coders applied this scheme to the entire dataset. The coding proved to be reliable. From these analyses, four different motives for referrals emerged, namely product enthusiasm, self-presentation, helping consumers and helping the firm. *Product enthusiasm* refers to the extent to which consumers are satisfied or delighted with the service or product. *Self-presentation* includes instances in which consumers wanted to demonstrate their knowledge, expertise, or good taste. *Helping consumers* refers to situations were consumers wanted to help the other consumer make a better decision, and *Helping the firm* refers to situations were consumers felt sympathy for a firm and wanted to help them succeed. These motives are similar to the ones suggested by Dichter (1966), and the motives uncovered by Sundaraman et al. (1998) in a smaller scale study. Additional analyses of the interview data revealed that these motives relate to different attributes of the referred service, and that different motives are important in different types of customer relations.

The next phase involved preparations for a more quantitative approach to uncovering the roles of the different motives for word of mouth, which would also allow us to link the different motives to other variables, including WOM activity, and personality characteristics like opinion leadership and market mavenism (Feick and Price 1987). Based on the motives established in study one, we developed a set of scale items to measure these motives. These items were discussed with a small panel of consumers and experts in order to come to a first set of items, that was further refined in two prestudies, involving two waves of small-scale surveys.

Phase three involved the administration of our scales to a panel of consumers, who filled out a survey that related to "a recent instance in which they referred a product to others." This survey included a number of measures to gauge the consumer's WOM activity and behaviors, including the amount of word of mouth spread, the number of people that were reached, and the persuasiveness of the WOM. This survey also included measures of the consumers' innovativeness, market mavenism, opinion leadership, and product expertise and involvement. In addition, we measured the tie-strength of the relationship in which the WOM occurred and whether the WOM was initiated by sender or receiver (cf., East et al., 2007).

Our first analyses show that the four WOM motives contributed significantly to the explanation of WOM activity, over and beyond the impact of well-established factors like expertise, market mavenism and opinion leadership. We also find support for the notion that different motives affect different aspects of WOM.

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