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THE WORD ON **WORD** OF **MOU**TH

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by Dave Balter

The other day, I was sitting in a meeting with some advertising agency executives. They had just presented a new television spot for an automobile targeted at twenty-somethings. When the spot ended, the lights came up and there was a long pause. Finally, the account director turned to the client and said, “This spot is viral. The buzz it creates will be better than word of mouth.”

The client wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but he'd heard those terms recently. And he liked them. They sounded like just what they needed. They bought the spot. And when the spot aired, not a single customer bothered to tell someone else about it. It “buzzed” itself into oblivion.

A similar scenario is playing out in every ad agency and PR firm around the country. Creative pitches are littered with the terms “buzz,” “viral,” and “word of mouth.” With non-traditional media becoming an important part of a marketer's spend, everyone wants to jump on the bandwagon. The problem is, the terms are being used interchangeably for everything marketers do; even worse, few marketers can tell them apart.

“Buzz,” “viral,” and “word of mouth” have different meanings to different people. So here are MY definitions, which quite likely differ from yours.

Buzz marketing typically includes **one shot** of **adrenaline** and a chaser of **product information**.

WORD OF MOUTH is the most powerful medium on the planet. It’s the actual sharing of an opinion about a product or service between two or more consumers. It’s what happens when people become natural brand advocates. It’s the holy grail of marketers, CEOs and entrepreneurs, as it can make or break a product. The key to its success: it’s honest and natural.

VIRAL MARKETING is an attempt to deliver a marketing message that spreads quickly and exponentially among consumers. Today, this often comes in the form of an email message or video. Contrary to alarmists’ fear, viral isn’t evil. It isn’t dishonest or unnatural. At its best, it is word of mouth enabled, and at its worst, it’s just another interruptive marketing message.

BUZZ MARKETING is an event or activity that generates publicity, excitement, and information to the consumer. It’s usually something that combines a wacky, jaw-dropping event or experience with pure branding, like tattooing your forehead (or your ass, as a NYC health club recently did). If buzz is done right, people will write about it, so it essentially becomes a great PR vehicle.

Let’s get these terms straight!

VIRAL MARKETING: SUBSERVIENT CHICKEN

I made the chicken do the funky dance. Then I made him smoke a cigarette. I tried to make him vomit, but I don't think that was in his repertoire.

The Subservient Chicken (<http://www.subservientchicken.com/>) is a website developed by Crispin Porter + Bogusky for their new client, Burger King. The website was comprised of a low-budget-looking video with a man in a low-budget living room dressed in a chicken suit. If you just typed in a word in the bar below the chicken, you could make the chicken do all sorts of (low-budget) things.

It's true. I went back to the Subservient Chicken website a number of times. I emailed the page to some friends. Then I emailed the page that included all the keywords about what the chicken would do, to some friends. I talked about it, and shared the concept of the chicken with lots of people. The chicken was addictive. It was viral.

The problem is, I rarely eat at Burger King. I didn't before the Subservient Chicken, and I don't now. Did I decide to try BK again because of this message? Nope. Did I discuss Burger King's amazing new chicken sandwich with others? Nope. Did I think about McDonald's French Fries? Sometimes.

The Subservient Chicken was viral marketing at its finest. It may have increased the overall brand perception of BK (now they're "cool," some may have thought), but the chicken was a one-trick chicken-pony. The missing ingredient: word of mouth. The chicken didn't make me want to discuss Burger King's product with anyone, and it certainly didn't make me reconsider my opinion about eating chicken nuggets.

TIP

Click on an underlined hyperlink to visit that site. For more tips like this, visit ([i](#)).

BUZZ MARKETING: RICHARD BRANSON IS NAKED!

About a year ago, Richard Branson wanted to launch his new mobile phone service in America. What he sought, as he always does, was to make an enormous splash. He wanted to do something that no one would forget. He just had to create some buzz.

The key to buzz marketing is that it has to be bigger, louder, better, more amazing, astounding, overwhelming, or incredible than the last time you did it. (Actually, not more than the last time YOU did it, but the last time someone did it to the people you are doing it to.) Buzz marketing typically includes one shot of adrenaline and a chaser of product information. The adrenaline is intended to help customers forget they're being marketed to. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

Creating buzz for Branson was left to U.S. Concepts, an event-marketing agency. Their answer: drop Richard Branson from a skyscraper into Times Square in New York City at rush hour — naked. At the same time, have two hundred people, dressed up in red spandex suits, running around handing out product samples and information leaflets, and otherwise scaring the hell out of the commuters running for the five o'clock train.

And you know what? They pulled it off. Okay, so Branson was in a nude suit and he was actually lowered on a crane. But those guys in the red spandex managed to hand out thousands of flyers and many people missed their five o'clock train. Overall, a raging success.

What was the impact? Well, this was certainly a buzz-generating event. They managed to stop traffic in Times Square, and people certainly wondered whether or not Branson was actually nude. The leaflets handed out likely drove some buyers into stores, so consider that a success as well. But let's remember to get our terms straight. This wasn't viral, since the campaign didn't create a message people would tell or send to each other. This wasn't word of mouth, either. This event didn't cause consumers to share their opinions and become natural brand advocates for Virgin mobile.

All I know is that Virgin has a cell phone. Whether or not the calling plan is good has never crossed my mind. And as usual for Virgin, branding comes first; in this case, it was all about Branson's package.

WORD OF MOUTH: THE SEGWAY

About five years ago, inventor Dean Kamen announced he had developed a product that would change the world. After keeping his idea under wraps for a few months — to heighten the tension — he finally unveiled his new project: the Segway. The claim was that the Segway would change public transportation forever. This motorized pedestrian cycle with a standing platform and extra tall handles was going to revolutionize modern living. The best part: it was impossible to fall off while riding the Segway. Now that was worth talking about.

For the better part of a year, the Segway was all people could talk about. When would “Ginger” (the internal pre-launch code name before Kamen announced the product to the public) be available on market? Who had one? What was the price, how could one

get one, how many were being made, how fast did it go? Did it come in funky iMac colors? The Segway had captured word of mouth. Everyone was talking about it, even though they didn't even have any direct experience with it. The Segway had created some pretty big expectations.

A few celebrities were given Segways, and later, the rest of us could pre-order them on Amazon. People started to buy them. The city of Atlanta actually bought some

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for their information guides, who rode around offering directions to tourists — who especially enjoyed trying to knock the guides off. Overall, word of mouth about the product was amazing and, save for the high price tag, people wanted them.

Then George W. Bush fell off (granted, he didn't turn it on first, but people didn't bother with that fact). And San Francisco banned them on its sidewalks. Some Segways were recalled for performance with the battery, regardless of repeated warnings about how to manage the battery. But people listen to warnings less than they listen to their friends. People continued to talk, but they began saying bad things. They said it wasn't worth the price, that it didn't do what it was supposed to do. It didn't come in iMac blue.

The Segway still had word of mouth, since consumers were sharing their honest opinions about the product. But this time the word of mouth wasn't so hot. Sales slid. People decided that driving their hybrid automobiles was enough of a revolution.

A WORD OF MOUTH PRIMER

In the end, it's people who decide what's worth talking about. All the positioning in the world won't make a crappy product worth discussing. Consumers experience products, services, and brands, and add them to their repertoire of conversation — either consciously or subconsciously. And each of us has a big back-catalog of word of mouth; we'll look to it when the time is right.

Anyone remember Wacky Packages from Topps? They were these cool sticker packs you could get about twenty years ago with items like *Rice a Phoni* and *Crackola* (made up of “broken bland colors,” of course). We have an original Wacky Packages tear sheet framed on our wall, and everyone who sees it starts talking and they can't stop. When they finally do, there are a few natural things that occur (pay attention, this is where we let you behind the curtain!):

MUTUAL DIALOGUE. People stare at the Wacky Packages, and then find someone else to talk to. They have to find someone else with whom to share their experience. It's boring to share things with ourselves, so we naturally want to engage others. Word of mouth isn't a solitary event. It takes two to tango.

STORYTELLING. What do people share when they talk about the Wacky Packages? Experiences. People want to share their own personal interactions with products. It's what makes them real. "My Mom used to buy me these," or "I used to have the *Ditch Boy Paint* one on my Huffy bike." To amplify word of mouth, you have to lead people to consider their stories so they can share them.

PASS-ALONG EFFECT. People like to have answers. They like to be able to extend the dialogue. That's why if we hear something often enough, we sometimes make someone else's experience our own opinion. One of our co-workers was a toddler when Wacky Packages came out, but he's the first one to explain everything about them to other newbies. So what if his opinion was created from the experiences of others. An indirect experience is still an experience, isn't it?

KNOWLEDGE DIFFUSION. Oh, and the ultimate key. People like to teach others. They like to be the first to know. Okay, so it's about feeding our egos. So what? Did you know Wacky Packages are back? Yep. Check 'em out at <http://wackypackages.com>. You heard it here first.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

So what's the easiest way to tell these mediums apart? Viral and buzz marketing are the cause. They are manufactured marketing initiatives that are intended to capture people's attention and get them talking. They can certainly be effective at cutting through today's cluttered marketplace, but when they become pervasive, they just become part of the noise.

Word of mouth is the desired effect. It is a natural, honest occurrence, and it's very difficult for a manufactured marketing message to create it. It's a medium made up of the conversations and communications between people. Word of mouth can go viral. When that honest opinion is fun, unusual, sexy, exciting, urgent, undiscovered, or shocking, it's worth sharing, and it will move farther much faster. But in order for that to happen, you must have actual brand advocacy, and people must be willing to go out of their way to share an opinion, an experience, or their passion about a product. The reason that word of mouth is so powerful is that it is a mutual conversation; you can't find it with a hundred other messages waiting to be deleted from your inbox.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave is the founder and President of BzzAgent, a word of mouth marketing and research firm located in Boston, MA. Before BzzAgent, he founded and managed two promotional marketing agencies, which were sold as a group in 2001. Dave also spent a number of years working for a variety of corporations, including Kessler Financial Services, where he managed direct marketing and affinity program implementations for *Fortune* 1000 clients, and Webb & Co., where he analyzed circulation and fulfillment operations and performed statistical modeling for consumer catalogs. Dave was named to the “40 under 40” by the Advertising Specialty Institute in 2001 and “Top Seven People Changing the Face of Beauty” by *Women’s Wear Daily* in 2004. He is a founding member of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) and holds a provisional U.S. patent on the word of mouth process. He is a frequent speaker on the subject of word of mouth and non-traditional media to corporate and academic audiences. Dave holds a B.A. in Psychology from Skidmore College.

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