
Buzz Marketing:

Creating Customers Through Word-of-Mouth

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How can you improve the chance customers will pass on a positive word-of-mouth about you or your organization? Buzz marketing. How do you get customers talking to the prospects you want to reach? Buzz marketing.

Buzz marketing is any word-of-mouth “gossip” or information about a product or service. It may burst on the scene with short-lived enthusiasm, or be sustained over time with the right back-up strategy.

Everybody wants buzz because when you get it, customers drive in more customers by talking you up to others. You, your organization, and your brand become top-of-mind when it comes time to buy.

Emmanuel Rosen, author of *Anatomy of Buzz*, defines buzz as “all the person-to-person communication about a brand.” It’s all your organization’s effort to generate positive person-to-person conversations about your products and services. It’s every person’s responsibility within an organization to make customers excited enough to want to share what they know with others. Having a great product or service backed by break-through buzz does little good if potential buyers have to interface with a cranky customer service rep. If the support systems don’t match your high-quality goods and services, buzz won’t deliver.

Buzz marketing is as ancient as the spoken word, so how does it differ in the age of technology? How is it different from other word-of-mouth campaigns such as

customer evangelism or viral marketing? How can you create buzz by design and not default?

Marketing 101

Viral Marketing:

This strategy pinpoints places and people to spread the word. Are you trying to attract young people and if so, which group--GenX? GenY? What about Seniors? Boomers? The affluent? Environmental advocates? Tide Cold Water clothes soap, for example, played up its energy savings, thus attracting the Coalition for Energy Efficiency to help spread the word. The Greenpeace effort of two Minnesotan men crossing the North Pole on foot and canoes is an example of viral marketing at its best. It encompasses all the elements: it was charitable, promotional, and on-line. It was designed to get people talking about the importance of climate change, offering periodic updates on their Web site, and urging people to contact Congress. They even threw in an opportunity to win a five-day tour for two to the Amazon. It got people talking.

Customer Evangelism:

This is a long-term strategic approach designed to build such a strong emotional bond with customers that they not only become loyal buyers, but will continue to sing your praises to others *over time*. Apple computer users are loyal to the end for example. They connect to Apple's image of creativity, innovation, and cutting-edge graphic interface. Their successful iPod campaign accounts for over 40% of their revenue alone.

Buzz Marketing:

Unlike viral or evangelism marketing, buzz campaigns are designed to create a quick stir. You want people saying, "The latest is..." or "the hot new thing is..." or "ooh, I gotta have this!" Buzz marketing is about getting what you provide noticed by creating an *experience or event* that get people talking about it. It's typically used for product launches—leveraging publicity and reaching people on or offline to stimulate

the event's impact. To build your name brand over the long haul then, you need to be different and great at what you do. And it doesn't necessarily have to cost much either. Imagine flying on Southwest Airlines for example, beginning your flight with a stand-up comedienne flight attendant cracking jokes and ending the flight by singing to you. If you enjoyed the experience, you're likely to tell your friends. It's clever, fun, and free.

One eye exam company's buzz campaign sponsored a kid's carnival in their parking lot. They sent flyers all over town with discount coupons and free kids eye exams. It brought in the whole family and eye exams were scheduled on the spot. The entire event was built around eye care. Clowns, music, face painting, crafts, and other low-cost events kept the kids happy while the parents created buzz.

A motor boat dealership creates buzz every year by bringing in head-liner water skiing professionals, offering trades and discounts on water skis, autograph signing, photo ops, equipment trades, and free hats. What started out with a few hundred people has grown to thousands of water ski enthusiasts flocking to the town for their annual "ski fix." During the event, hundreds of ski boats are sold as well.

Art galleries are notorious for creating buzz among art enthusiasts about the hottest new artists. Movie studios create buzz with advance sale of products before a movie's release. Batman sold millions in products before the movie even appeared in theaters.

The good news is that buzz marketing requires a short-term effort to create an experience or event that can potentially deliver long-term business. Every product or service—no matter how spectacular, has a limited window of opportunity. Often, you're only as good as your last transaction. Buyer attention span is being pulled in dozens of directions now by competitive products and services offered in a variety of mediums, making customer brand loyalty more and more illusive. To build buzz for the long haul, integrate buzz marketing strategies into your overall marketing plan.

13 WAYS TO GET BUZZ

1. Get great at what you do.

Word of mouth has to be earned, not bought. One real estate office offers a one-stop shop, complete with escrow, title insurance, lenders, and multiple agents who are crossed-trained to assist advancing each sale. They also have billboards around town letting people know that they have every listing in the county on their web site. Every year, agents in the office win top national awards for simply being the best in sales and service.

2. Differentiate yourself.

How are you better than or different from others? Find a Unique Selling Proposition (USP) and let people know what that is (the most of, the shortest wait, the biggest selection etc.). One dentist's office has a TV at every chair (for watching movies or relaxing nature scenes), optional radio with headphone, massage-type exam chairs for a chair massage if there's any waiting time, aroma therapy, incense, candles, and "painless" dentistry. They've made quantum steps in removing patient anxiety and discomfort.

3. Create a High-Concept Campaign

- a. Make it easy for your customer to talk about what you do, share their enthusiasm, thoughts, and comments with their circles of influence. Having them experience your USP makes it easier. Don't tell them how you're different and great, *show them*. Also, what might seem mundane or uninteresting to you might be an USP that would attract hundreds or even thousands of enthusiastic buyers who would love to talk about their experience.
- b. Ask, "Is this is a buzz-worthy (i.e. product launch) event?" If so, ask, "How do we put the media and PR plan in place to get that kind of buzz happening? How do we get people passing on positive word-of-mouth? There's traditional media such as print, radio, and TV, but it's

harder to get your messages heard with on-line competition. And ad hype no longer creates instant credibility. Customers have been over-hyped and have learned to be skeptical. Only word-of-mouth buzz builds credibility now.

- c. Buzz needs to reflect an organization's philosophy, core values, or its cause. It should never be a tactic or gimmick just for the sake of building buzz, but rather a strategy that continues to build a solid marketing foundation integrated with where the organization is headed. At its core, buzz marketing starts with the spirit and attitude of your organization. Some experts agree that customer service—what customers tell their friends about how they were treated, is the *number-one factor in whether customers refer others to you.*
- d. Use customer feedback to learn what people are saying and how they're saying it. Use that information to plan additional buzz marketing tactics, make product or service improvements, and/or target new markets.

4. Target “Hub” categories.

Hubs are groups of like-minded people who frequently share information with each other. They could be a group of friends, clubs, school groups, professional networks, sports enthusiasts etc.. These hubs of people are eager to talk about new things, especially their “experts” or opinion leaders. Hub influencers are hungry to know the latest and greatest and pass it on.

5. Use the Internet.

More and more people are spending time getting connected to each other and “talking.” Within seconds, messages can be sent out to hundreds of friends about something someone is excited about. One way to get started is to study patterns of online conversations. Look for the people who not only do a lot of the talking, but who are also influential within their special interest groups.

Find the people customers seek within these large communities to answer their questions on very specific topics. You could look for professional people who demonstrate the credibility and knowledge others consider as relevant sources of advice and who are frequently read. In the healthcare world for example, doctors, nurses, practitioners, or any other provider posts listings to online communities or blogs. These people tend to be centers influence. Study online conversations to find those who drive them. Then develop relationships with those and involve them in word-of-mouth programs. Ask them for their opinion, trial test a product etc. to get them involved.

6. Use Product sampling.

Give your product or service away for free or a trial period. Many software companies offer a trial download before purchase. Salesforce.com took its software to an extended level by making the product sample free for an entire year. It became the basis of the entire company launch and eventually led to a successful IPO. Mrs. Fields Cookies got started by Debbie walking the sidewalks with trays of cookie samples. Big-time buzz back at the office!

7. Run a Tell-a-Friend campaign.

Offer discounts on products or services for customers who tell their friends about what you do. Give customers several “Tell a Friend” business cards to hand out. Write the customer’s name on each Tell-a-Friend card. The card may offer a discount, free trial offer, products samples, or other attractive perks for new customers. When the referred friend brings in the card, they get the perk and the customer earns points (discounts) for future purchases. Keep track of customer “Tell-a-Friend” points in your data base. The rewarded customer buys, refers, and comes back again. Tell-a-Friend is also increasingly built into many Web sites today.

8. Connect with your “Weak Ties.”

In Mark Granovetter’s work, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, he states that most

new information comes to you not from close friends or people with whom you spend a lot of time, but from acquaintances—people with whom you have *weak ties*. Decades ago people mostly communicated with others at work, with family, or friends, but what the Internet does is create an explosion of additional, *weak ties*. Find them and add them to your marketing reach.

9. Connect with your Evangelists.

Evangelists are the loyal people who not only buy from you, but also spread the word about you. For some organizations, that could be as much as 25% of their customers. To find your evangelists, set up a measuring system to learn who's talking about you and referring new customers:

- a. Examine call center logs to find out who's calling in the most, if they're offering suggestions for improvements, or ideas on new ways for you to get the word out. Contact them and include them in focus groups and new product launches. Also consider customer complaints as an opportunity to enlist their help in improvements. A converted complainer can become your biggest advocate.
- b. Measure what bloggers or fans on blogs are saying about you. Contact them directly (email or call) and invite them in for a new product demonstration or a beta program. Including them in marketing at the strategy development stage is a good way to increase buy-in and continue to spread buzz.

10. Measure results.

There are several traditional and non-traditional ways to measure the impact of word-of-mouth:

- a. Add questions to tracking surveys. On phone-based surveys ask, "How did you hear about us? How did you hear about this product/service? How likely are you to recommend us to a friend?"

b. Offer a Pass-Along coupon. For example, hair salons, spas, fast food chains, and car wash facilities might give customers a coupon to pass along to friends or acquaintances for discounts on services. Track how many are given out and how many are turned in. In its early start-up stage, Power Bar did a simple pass-along campaign and knew exactly how many people gave the coupon to friends.

b. Archive, study, and become part of on-line conversations. These provide a database of natural conversations—the ones that customers are having online: message boards, chat rooms, blogs, email lists, and product review sites.

11. Do something radically different.

To generate sales on Black Friday, Target had celebrities give people an early morning wake-up call, reminding people that they could shop Target at 6:00 AM. Doing something shocking or different can get a lot of buzz on TV, but it's important to tie the campaign back to the product or service.

12. Unevenly distribute information.

Make your product or service available only in select markets or locations. When people find out about something they can't have, they tend to want it and talk about it. When Red Bull enters a new market for example, it only allows select distributors to carry their product. In the early stages, it's more interested in reinforcing a message rather than introducing product into the marketplace. It gets people talking about where it got started, their ingenious CEO, and how hard it was to get approved. Red Bull combines many dimensions, not just the product itself, to get people talking.

Another example of uneven distribution of information, and arguably one of the most successful buzz campaigns, was the launch of Trivial Pursuit to the US market in 1983. Advance copies were sent to celebrities who were mentioned in the game, and then mystery envelopes with one card from the

game were sent one-at-a-time to toy store buyers. Soon, people were talking. Celebrities hosted trivia parties. People were playing the game in bars. Nearly 150 radio stations staged a trivia event and gave away games. By 1984, Trivial Pursuit had sold 20 million copies of a fairly pricey “toy.” Its uniqueness, combined with relentless energy and creative ideas generated a colossal national buzz around the product.

13. Respond to negative buzz.

Viewed correctly, customer complaints are ironically *positive* indicators of how organizations can improve. Fix the dissatisfaction and then announce your new and improved version. Every business gets negative buzz at some point. What’s important is how you respond to it.

To Buzz, Or Not to Buzz

If you’re looking to create an exciting message to get people talking about you or your business and the only idea you have with which to do this is a buzz marketing campaign, you’re in trouble. Don’t try to cover up bad products or service with buzz. It will only create a buzz backfire. Advertising wizard David Ogilvy once said, “The best way to kill a bad product is great advertising.” Ads bring in the customers, and the disappointed experience from a bad product or service kills it flat with negative word-of-mouth.

It’s been said that if you make someone happy, they’ll tell two people. If you make someone mad, they’ll tell ten. Also, if your offerings lack an authentic “soul,” then any buzz attempts will fall flat. Witness McDonald hamburger’s campaign to pay rappers to mention Big Macs in their songs. Trying to “buy” a cultural niche in an inauthentic way can whip up negative word-of-mouth. People see through it every time.

To make things happen in the future, buzz marketing will look for new and improved

ways of working *with* customers instead of advertising, marketing, or selling *to* them. One thing will never change however. At the end of the day, it still comes down to “make a friend, make a sale.” Make an *excited* friend, create a buzz.

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