

Managing Buzz Marketing in the Digital Age

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Buzz marketing is a promotional posture that is focused on maximizing word-of-mouth of a product or phenomenon in a viral way via technology, whether through personal conversations or on larger scale discussions on social media platforms. Ultimately, buzz marketing affects brand perceptions, but there is still the question as to why certain brands, situations, or phenomenon are talked about more than others, both right after first exposure and in the months that follow? The purpose of this article is to improve the understanding of buzz marketing, and to propose a three step buzz marketing process based on the extant literature for implementing buzz marketing successfully.

BUZZ MARKETING TODAY

Buzz marketing is a promotional posture that is driven by word of mouth (WOM), a process where people influence the actions or attitudes of others. It takes WOM one step further by using technology, media, and creativity to foster individuals to talk, share, and spread information about a product or brand to the point that it is viewed as entertaining, fascinating, and newsworthy or simply just so dramatically different from the norm so ultimately, it becomes an enjoyable experience to share. However, for this to occur, there must be something interesting, clever, amusing, catchy, or remarkable enough about the message such that WOM spreads quickly to create “buzz.” For the message to go viral, it requires crafty marketing and digital tools to succeed (Mohr 2007).

While buzz marketing resembles the traditional marketing model in targeting audiences through varying media, in the case of the former, the marketer injects the audience with a jaw-dropping message that is so interesting and exciting for it to spread like wildfire. According to Mohr (2007), that appealing element of exhilaration is key to buzz marketing because it is the nature of the message that makes people want to share it with others. Ultimately, buzz marketing targets a greater number of people than in the case a traditional marketing campaign. Given that the terms buzz marketing and viral marketing are often used interchangeably with WOM communications, the following discussion clarifies the differences in the three.

Word of Mouth Communications

Word of mouth (WOM) communications, also referred to as opinion leadership, is the process by which a person informally influences other people's actions. This can occur face-to-face, or in the context of a phone conversation, text, or email. Key to this influence is that it is interpersonal and informal, and those involved in the exchange of information have nothing to gain financially (Schiffman and Kanuk 2007). A person is more likely to believe something that comes from a person he knows, respects, and finds credible, as opposed to the traditional TV commercials and print ads. In fact, 84% of consumers say they either completely or somewhat trust recommendations from family, colleagues, and friends about

products and services – demonstrating that these recommendations rank high as a source for trustworthiness (Nielsen Newswire 2013).

According to Craig Johnson, Managing Director of Marketing Effectiveness and Reach portfolio at Nielsen Southeast Asia, North Asia and Pacific: “Undoubtedly, word-of-mouth recommendations from people they know and trust are the best way to promote your product to consumers, especially when combined with the power of television and digital advertising.” He adds: “Mastering online word-of-mouth marketing techniques can result in quicker and viral reach. Brand marketers can widen the circle of trust, by engaging passionate brand advocates to amplify their message and giving them a compelling reason to talk. Trust is fragile. Practice transparency and accountability, because if trust is broken, your advocates also have the power to damage credibility and reputation.” (Nielsen Press Room 2015).

WOM is an effective form of marketing, since people trust their friends and family opinions. While people still engage in face to face talks, the Internet has allowed conversations to spread globally and be heard by millions within minutes. With the Internet the largest mass-communication medium, it comes as no surprise that marketers attempt to deliberately encourage the WOM process by designing marketing campaigns that draw audiences for them to pass along a message. Also known as buzz marketing and viral marketing, these tactics create the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence (Wilson, 2000).

Viral Marketing

The term viral marketing explains the phenomenon by which consumers jointly share and spread marketing-relevant information, which is initially sent out by marketers to stimulate and capitalize on word-of-mouth (WOM) behaviors (Van der Lans et al. 2010). Essentially, viral marketing is a marketing technique that uses Internet, social networking, and technologies to encourage people to engage in word of mouth, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence. Analogous to the traits of a virus or an infectious disease, this marketing technique takes advantage of rapid multiplication to explode a message to millions of people. A widely cited classic example of viral marketing is Hotmail.com, which promoted its free email addresses and services in every e-mail sent by patrons using the technology. In December 1996, Hotmail had 500,000 registered users, and in less than a year later, the company had 12,000,000 users.

Buzz Marketing

Buzz marketing is a promotional posture that is focused on maximizing word-of-mouth of a product or phenomenon in a viral way via technology, whether through personal conversations or on larger scale discussions on social media platforms. It is the practice of drawing “influencers” and “connectors,” people who have lots of contacts in different circles. These people can be experts, members of the press, politicians, celebrities, or well-connected customers that others rely on for information. Unlike WOM, whereby opinion leaders are self-motivated because of their knowledge of a brand, those spreading buzz may or may not be experts, and are spreading buzz on varying things that are introduced by marketers and the media. For buzz marketing to succeed, technology is critical for the brand message to go viral (Mohr 2007).

THE LITERATURE ON BUZZ MARKETING

Buzz marketing is a popular business strategy for spreading ideas and information between people. It is similar to a virus in the sense that it creates the potential for exponential growth as the message rapidly multiplies. Initial interest in buzz marketing started with trendy toys and fads like Pokemon Cards, Beanie Babies, Pet Rocks, and Cabbage Patch Dolls, which created a lot of media hype. It stems from the fact that people like to share experiences, and if the experiences are out of the ordinary, there is a snowballing effect with the potential of skyrocket success. Many of the articles written by industry experts on the internet suggest that buzz is usually something that combines a wacky, jaw-dropping event or experience with pure branding to get people talking. According to McKinsey & Co., and as reported by firm strategy

consultant Renee Dye (2000), two categories that are highly driven by buzz are motion pictures and broadcasting. Buzz is further attributed for the success of movies like *The Blair Witch Project*, said to be the best viral market campaign of all time, which on its opening weekend, it grossed \$1.5 million on only 27 screens (Davidson 2013).

In today's technological world, a message can be manipulated with a viral marketing campaign with sites like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The music artist Justin Bieber, for example, was discovered on YouTube after he began posting homemade videos, becoming the first artist to surpass 10 billion total video views on Vevo. In the case of Susan Boyle, she became an international viral sensation when she appeared as a contestant on the TV program, *Britain's Got Talent*, singing "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Misérables*, which attained 211 million plus views.

Companies that employ buzz marketing look to grow brand awareness through the growth of online traffic with the goal of improving its bottom line. With this interest in mind, there have been a growing number of trade books written by industry experts on the subject matter (e.g. *What's Your Buzz: Finding and Creating the Right Talk about You and Your Business*; *Brand Buzz: 3 Breakthrough Secrets for Building a Winning Brand*; *The Zen of Social Media Marketing: An Easier Way to Build Credibility, Generate Buzz, and Increase Revenue*; *PR In A Box: Creating a Buzz Around Your Brand*; and, so forth). However, most of these trade books focus on business strategy and tools that offer case studies for achieving buzz marketing success.

Most recently, academic researchers examined the importance of seeding influential social network members for the success of a viral marketing campaign and product diffusion, and determined that connections between consumers in social networks vary in strength, depending on the characteristics of relationships and the information exchanged (Chen, Van der Lans, and Chan 2017). While seeding strategies have strong influences on the success of viral marketing campaigns, the best seeding strategies can be up to eight times more successful than others, and the social network remains a crucial determinant of optimal seeding strategies. Adding to this, marketers can achieve the highest number of referrals, across various settings, if they seed the message to hubs, high-degree seeding; or bridges, high-betweenness seeding (Hinz et al 2011). Groeger and Buttle (2014) offer a theoretically informed critique of current measurement practices for word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) campaigns. Other researchers examine ways to manage WOM with a view that product success is related to the discussions it generates (Godes and Mayzlin 2009). According to Carl (2006), "effective WOM and buzz marketing is not rooted in the marketing of a particular brand, product, or service, but rather is based on everyday relationships and conversations of people discussing other matters" (p. 30). Liu (2006), in studying box office success, found that the volume of word of mouth offers significant explanatory power for box office revenue, both in the aggregate and for the early weeks, in support of a theory that WOM functions in the movie market primarily through an informative effect on awareness.

THE BUZZ MARKETING PROCESS

With the rise of digital tools, buzz marketing has evolved into a viral marketing technique that maximizes the word-of-mouth potential of a particular brand campaign via technology, whether through conversations or larger scale discussions on social media platforms. However, for buzz marketing to be implemented successfully, there must be more than just getting people to talk about a brand. A question, for example, is why certain brands are more buzz worthy than others, both right after people first hear about them and in the months that follow.

The buzz marketing process (see Figure 1) seeks to explain how, why, and under what circumstances in today's digital age, brand information spreads quickly. The buzz marketing process centers on the elements that increase or decrease the likelihood that a product, brand, a new idea, etc., will be talked about and buzzed about by members of a population. There are three main steps to the buzz marketing

process that influence the spread of information in today's digital age: value, viral content, and seeding strategy. The following discussion addresses each step.

Step 1: Value

While practitioner writings suggest that buzz is usually something that combines a wacky, jaw-dropping event or experience with pure branding to get people talking, it is critical to identify the core value of a brand that lends itself to sharing content. At the core of the buzz marketing process there must be a product, service, or idea that is of value to customers and audiences. Interestingly, marketers that attempted to copy viral campaigns learned that imitating a campaign often does not work. Without something of value to begin with, even the most successful campaigns do not last.

Brand equity is a core concept of marketing. It is the "added value" embedded in the product, the differential advantage, and influences a firm's performance in a positive way by impacting consumers' reactions toward a brand. This added value can be viewed from the perspective of the firm, the trade, or the consumer (Farquhar 1989). Aaker (1991, p. 15) defines brand equity as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers." Brand equity has a positive impact on consumers' brand preferences (Hoeffler and Keller 2003), and when customers perceive greater value in a brand, there is greater likelihood in them buying it (Aaker 1991).

The goal of branding is to create an emotional connection with customers that add value. The challenge of buzz marketing is to bring out the added value of the brand to customers and tie it to an emotional message. According to Libert and Tynski (2013), in discussing emotions that make marketing campaigns go viral, "the goal is to find the link to an issue that plagues your consumers and relates directly or even tangentially to your brand or product. At the same time, you must make sure that the topic you choose also positively reflects the position of your brand."

Step 2: Viral Content

In today's digital age, with so many different types of content available, the challenge to marketers is how to present content in a way that stands and generates buzz about the brand for it to go viral. For brands to draw attention, they must be able to stand out above the noise. While there is no formula for creating a viral campaign, there are successful creative and engaging tactics that generate more buzz and exposure for a brand. In an *Inc.* article titled "The 10 Things That Make Content Go Viral," Kristin Tynski, an expert on viral emotions research with publications on the *Harvard Business Review*, shares her insights on what it takes to create viral content (Libert 2016). The ten characteristics of viral content include:

1. Evokes high arousal (usually meaning the content is surprising)
2. Engages positive emotions
3. Creates connection/empathy between content and content consumer
4. Has a newsworthy hook
5. Is easily understood
6. Is a quickly consumed media format
7. Is simple to share
8. Generates value or works toward a goal when shared
9. Doesn't reflect negatively on sharer
10. Appeals to broad/universal interests or topic areas (food, pets, common life events, celebrities, etc.)

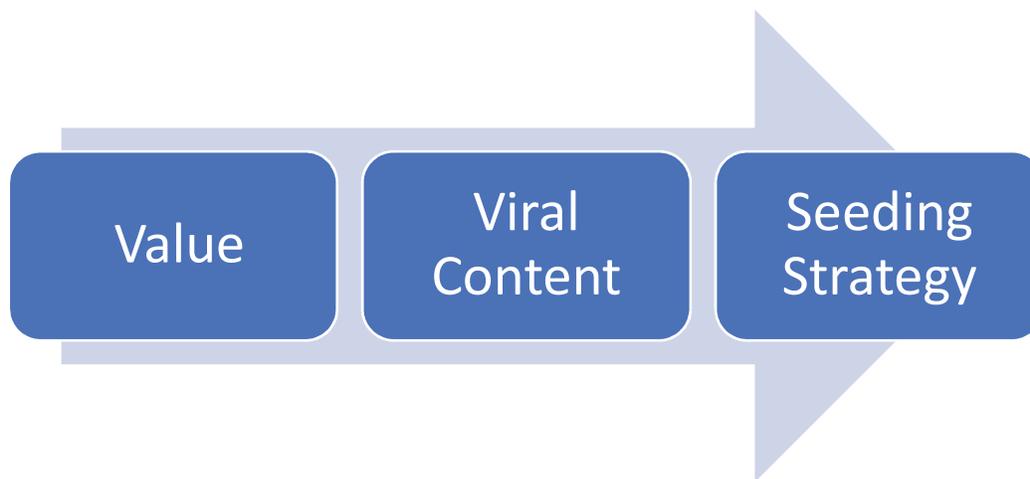
Step 3: Seeding Strategy

The seeding strategy determines the first group of targeted customers to initiate a viral marketing campaign (Bampo et al. 2008; Kalish, Mahajan, and Muller 1995; Libai, Muller, and Peres 2005), and has a strong influence on its success. Seeding to well-connected people is the most successful seeding strategy approach because these attractive seeding points are more likely to participate in viral marketing campaigns, and as Hinz et al (2011) quote, “marketers should pick highly connected persons as initial seeds if they hope to generate awareness or encourage transactions through their viral marketing campaigns because these hubs promise a wider spread of the viral message.”

Typically, buzz marketing is driven by social media word of mouth "influencers" and “connectors” to share brand information and to proactively start conversations about it. Companies rely on social media influencers to raise brand awareness, promote brands, and build brand buzz with the goal of increasing online traffic, sales, and profits. These people typically have established online presences and large followings on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and in circles of social influence, they possess the power of influencing their fan base.

Influencer marketing is an important part of buzz marketing strategy, and is critical for brand success. According to an article in *Adweek* (Guest 2016), influencer marketing is increasing in importance, as evidenced from the flurry of companies using this approach. With brands making an average of \$6 for every \$1 spent on influencer marketing, it is clear why this is one of the fastest-growing ways to connect with consumers on social networks (Morrison 2015). Moreover, with Facebook Live, many influencers are now livestreaming and broadcasting themselves in real time. Whether celebrity influencers, political influences, fashion influences, B2B influencers, or else, each has the potential to play a role in the success of the brand. In addition to targeting social media influencers, marketers also take interest in reaching to people known as "connectors," or big-name personalities and celebrities who can lend instant credibility and exposure.

FIGURE 1
THE BUZZ MARKETING PROCESS



CONCLUSION

Buzz marketing captures the attention of consumers and media to the point that people talk about the brand because the message is perceived as entertaining, fascinating, and/or newsworthy. Companies that employ buzz marketing hope to increase brand awareness, and increase online traffic, sales, and profits. However, for this to work, it is important to recognize that buzz marketing has evolved into a viral digital marketing technique. With the world becoming increasingly digital, it is necessary to bridge word of mouth (WOM) with technology (e.g., the Internet, mobile phones, apps, tablets, smart TVs, etc.) and “outside the box” thinking. The intent of this article was to improve the understanding of buzz marketing in today’s digital age, and to propose a three step buzz marketing process based on the extant literature for implementing buzz marketing successfully.

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