

Contagious

WHY THINGS CATCH ON



Ideas about how to make word-of-mouth marketing work are nothing to sneeze at.

BY PAUL R. BERGERON III

It takes more than luck, risqué words or imagery, a cat or a hilarious punch-line to create memorable, viral content. Jonah Berger knows this. He should, having studied the most popular “forwarded” stories from the New York Times’ website during a recent six-month period, analyzed hundreds of word-of-mouth marketing campaigns and immersed himself in all the word-of-mouth data from KellerFay Group, which tracks and studies word-of-mouth marketing.

Berger says one of the best things about word-of-mouth marketing is that it’s available to anyone—and it basically is free. It doesn’t involve a seven-digit media spend, guesswork or formulating the perfect headline or slogan. Many forward-thinking apartment community marketers use word of mouth by encouraging residents to speak highly of their experiences at the community via social media or when talking to friends. Berger suggests how actual marketing campaigns can be built or harnessed through word of mouth.

Successful word-of-mouth campaigns have shown to be more than 10 times as effective as paid advertising because consumers “trust” word of mouth more than an advertising message.

A ‘Duh’ Idea

Simple awareness about how and what people do when communicating with one another can help marketers pick up ideas and clues on how to improve word of mouth. One “duh” example is when a publisher recently wanted Berger’s feedback on a textbook (Berger is a professor at Penn’s Wharton School of Business). The publisher sent two books. “One for you to review and one you can pass along to someone who might find it valuable,” the publisher told him. Berger points out that this takes advantage of the targeting benefit of word of mouth. Rather than the marketer having to find interested leads, they encourage the consumer to do it for them.

Berger recently spoke to 40 association executives at Leading Authorities, a Washington, D.C., speaker agency that represents him, and asked the group to guess what percent of word-of-mouth messaging comes from online posts. Most suggested close to 75 percent. The answer, he says, is 7 percent.

Berger says many estimate a greater percent, especially because the Internet serves as a place of public record. “Like so many like to say, ‘Once it’s online, it’s there forever,’” he says.

True. But even when considering younger people, that statistic still only reaches as high as 15 percent. Most word of mouth happens offline. And online means it’s technology-driven (not psychologically inspired) and he says technology is ever changing, and keeping up with the latest outlet, such as Instagram, can be tiring and ineffective.

But psychology does not change. Word of mouth originates from in-person discussions. “People want to talk about what is important to them; what they are doing, what they think,” Berger says. “The psychological reasons for doing that don’t change. That’s human nature.”

From this comes recommendations galore, everything from restaurants and movies to clothing and every-day products.

Crafting Contagious Content

Berger says the key formula for generating word-of-mouth publicity is to craft contagious content.

“Something that goes viral is not due to luck,” Berger says. He insists that marketers who want their messages to go viral must focus on the message, not the messenger. He says that Malcolm Gladwell, best-selling author of “The Tipping Point,” got that piece wrong.

Gladwell’s book says it’s most important to find the key messengers, the people he calls “influencers,” and have them carry your message. “But there is no research that confirms that method works or works best,” Berger says. “Put another way, ‘To start a forest fire, it doesn’t matter how big the first spark is.’”

STEPPS To Success

Berger’s book, “Contagious,” explains six key strategies for making something go viral: STEPPS.

Social Currency: People like to share things with others that make them look good, sound smart and appear to be well informed. Therefore, your message should arm them with information that they will want to share.

If you are a product or a brand, and you do this, your product or brand “will go along for the ride” whenever it is spoken as part of a “recommendation” or is shared in favorable light by others.

For example, LinkedIn sent flattering emails to a group of their users and told each of them that their profile was among the top 5 percent viewed overall. What did those people do? They shared that fact with friends to make themselves look good. Those friends then learned more about LinkedIn and logged onto or signed up with LinkedIn. This professional online networking site didn’t need to do anything more to generate this kind of buzz. Its users did it for them. Everyone, it seemed, was talking about LinkedIn.

The same holds true for secrets. When someone bestows great, impressive or valuable information to you and requests, “But keep it a secret,” what do you do? You tell some of your friends. This makes you look impressive; like you are an insider.

Or, if the message is interesting, it will be passed along. The right message can make anything seem interesting. Who would think blenders could be something that people would want to share and talk about. The manufacturer Blendtec makes kitchen blenders. It’s CEO (who is not a celebrity) created a video series about what its

blenders were capable of doing called “Will It Blend.” This video series has become an Internet video sensation. Its low-budget (if you discount the cost of the phone), 90-second spot on “Will It Blend—iPhone” has more than 11 million views on YouTube.

Triggers: By including “easily memorable information,” that message will be top of mind and tip of the tongue, Berger says. When he asked the group of 40 executives if Disney, Cheerios or Dow’s Scrubbing Bubbles bathroom cleaner generated the most word of mouth, most said Disney. A few tried to outsmart the crowd and chose Scrubbing Bubbles.

“Cheerios generates the most buzz, because people eat cereal every day,” Berger says. “People love Disney and the Disney experience, but they only go there once a year, at most, so they aren’t always talking about it. Breakfast time is the trigger. A chart of buzz showed that people were particularly chatty about Cheerios in the morning—no surprise, they just ate a bowl.

Other effective, popular trigger examples were Michelob (Weekends Were Made for Michelob) and the God-awful music video “Friday” by Rebecca Black. “This is called one of the worst songs ever written, but it has more than 300 million YouTube views because people think of it every Friday,” Berger says.

Emotion: When we care, we share. Adding anger, awe and humor, among other emotions, work well. The emotion can come from a well-written headline, but even better, a stirring photo, such as the one used with a highly shared New York

Times article “The Mysterious Cough, Caught on Film.”

Public: Built to show, built to grow. Berger’s favorite example is the Mac laptop. It was originally designed so the logo could be seen when it was closed, but as soon as a user opened it, the logo appeared upside down to someone else seeing it from across the way. So, they flipped it to make it easier for others to see. “Social Proof” is another way to describe this strategy. If you have a product that all can see and take notice of in public, word can spread. One example is the white cords Apple used for its iPod. Traditionally, headphone cords were black. When iPod use exploded a few years ago, people couldn’t help notice the cords in public, Berger says.

Practical Value: News people can use. An 86-year-old farmer Ken Craig did a 121-second video on how to shuck corn. This amateur-made video shot in his kitchen has nearly 7.5 million views.

Stories: People are inherent storytellers, and all great brands also learn to tell stories. Information travels under the guise of idle chatter. Think of Subway sandwich chain spokesperson Jared, who lost all that weight by eating Subway every day. The story is about him losing weight, but Subway is happy to go along on the ride—like they were in the Trojan Horse—and reap the value of all that publicity. ■■

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