

Strategies for choosing influentials in buzz marketing

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Abstract. Present-day economy transforms profound changes, which are influenced by growing competition and opportunities of new technologies. One of the most important goals which the modern companies pursue is to find the right way of effective marketing communication with customers. The aim of this article is to analyze how to mark out, both in real and virtual world, these individuals who find it enjoyable to spread information about a brand and a product, and who are willing to share their opinions with other market participants, and whose recommendations help businesses accomplish their marketing objectives as well as conduct effective activities.

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INTRODUCTION

Talking, disseminating information through the grapevine and buzzing have always been present in people's lives, thus one cannot imagine today's world without verbal communication. However, it has been only recently that verbal communication has been considered a vitally important marketing aspect of modern communication between businesses and consumers. Fast changing markets have necessitated using other than traditional tools of marketing communication. Since advertising campaigns to date, especially those involving traditional advertising, have failed to be effective, entrepreneurs have been forced to seek alternative means of finding new channels of marketing communication. In 2000 Malcolm Gladwell's book titled 'The Tipping Point' was published, and it came as a turning point for contemporary marketing (Hughes, 2006), as it presented new opportunities of imparting information to consumers. The book generated widespread interest among media and marketing specialists as it depicted mechanisms, analogous to those of disseminating infectious diseases, of circulating information across social media. Gladwell noticed that information published on the Internet is immediately grasped by a number of people, and if it is interesting enough to attract the attention of an Internet user, it is disseminated in a virus-like manner, from one computer to another. The information sometimes evolves and changes, usually to the advantage of an enterprise, brand or product, however this is not a rule. Whether or not the information is profitable depends on its kind, construction, its recipient and sender. The purpose of spreading the information and the prior verification of emotions it is expected to evoke are important too. Spreading the information on the Internet or in real

life is called buzz marketing. Like virus, it can be controlled or just the opposite, it can get out of control and outside the rules.

The aim of this article is to mark out, both in real and virtual world, these individuals who find it enjoyable to spread information about a brand and a product, and who are willing to share their opinions with other market participants, and whose recommendations help businesses accomplish their marketing objectives as well as conduct effective activities.

THE ESSENCE AND TYPES OF BUZZ MARKETING

Buzz marketing is a part of a communication process between a company and a customer, and it is difficult to provide unambiguous definition. In the subject literature buzz marketing is also called Word of Mouth Marketing (abbr. WOMM). The lack of a clear definition of the process components causes that buzz marketing is defined as providing consumers with topics of conversation relating to the company's offer and skillful prompting of this kind of communication (Sernovitz, 2011). Both prompting and delivering information as messages can be divided into two groups (Pilarczyk, 2011):

- face-to-face buzz marketing – information and messages are passed on through direct contact,
- on-line buzz marketing – sending information and messages through the Internet or mobile devices such as mobile phones.

Face-to-face buzz marketing is mainly getting people talk about particular products, brands or trends in a particular environment aimed at boosting sales. On-line buzz marketing is a broad concept since it exists in all forms in hypermedia environment, i.e. in a Web 2.0 environment, in instruments of marketing communication present on the Internet, as well as in instruments which take advantage of mobile technologies. Buzz is widespread on Internet forums, in blogs, messengers and in social media. The Internet is a medium of viral marketing, which refers to spreading interesting content, links, films or audio files and sending them to other users.

Face-to-face buzz marketing is not an innovative technique. Conversations, recommendations and opinions about products and brands are intrinsic to human communication. On-line buzz marketing should be analysed from a completely different point of view. Most of all, a distinction between buzz marketing and buzz should be made. Buzz is an inherent feature of humans and thus it cannot be affected by any company. It is not governed by any rules, because it refers to genuine/real conversations between consumers (Sernovitz, 2011). Converting buzz into buzz marketing enables companies to undertake deliberate and conscious activities, which will produce the desired result.

Buzz marketing is therefore understood as defined, conscious marketing activities aimed at reaching consumers (recipients of marketing communication messages) in a direct, seemingly unintended, way, and triggering positive associations with the brand or product. For this reason buzz marketing is defined in the subject literature as skillful and well-thought-out utilizing interpersonal relations (Rosen, 2008). If such relations are utilized skillfully, they will serve as modern tools of communication between an enterprise and its customers, regardless of customer's loyalty and his status (potential or present).

The essence of buzz marketing is spreading information, which is based on interpersonal contacts and thus perceived as reliable, true and verified. Products and brands recommended by friends or family are more trusted and more probable to be purchased. A message sent by a well-known trustworthy person is more effective than other kinds of marketing, including advertising. Mass advertising has recently lost much of its impact in favour of new communication instruments. It should be noted that today a new type of consumers has emerged, i.e. consumers who are difficult to appeal through advertising designed for mass audience.

Today's consumer is an individualist lost in countless ambiguous marketing messages, who ignores them consciously or unconsciously. Today's consumer wants to be appreciated as an individual, therefore the message must be trustworthy and precisely targeted at him. It is by no means connected with direct marketing, as this instrument is not as effective as it used to be, or traditional direct marketing, since today's consumer is aware of 'persuaders', whose task is to persuade consumers to purchase.

Advertising slogans such as 'must have' discourage consumers from purchasing. Consumers react entirely different to slogans communicating 'I have bought the product, I have already tried it and I am satisfied;', especially when the opinion is given by a close, trustworthy person. Such a way of communication is called buzz marketing, the idea which determines the existence of today's businesses. That is why skillfully stimulated buzz is important.

POPULARITY OF BUZZ MARKETING

Marketing environment has willingly accepted this kind of customer marketing communication, mainly due to three reasons: buzz, skepticism and closeness (Śliwińska, Pacut, 2011). Buzz refers to information noise, which is caused by information overload concerning communication between a business and customers. Even the best message happens to be missed or forgotten by the target group as a result of information overload. Skepticism refers to consumers' awareness and their vast knowledge. Today's consumers' awareness has been determined by numerous messages saying that advertisements do not reliably inform about the quality, usefulness and functionality of the advertised product. A strictly advertising message is perceived as a sales pitch. Customers have a realistic approach, based on their experience, to that type of messages sent by companies. It is also worth mentioning that emotions triggering purchase are evoked by closeness which in fact means contacts between consumers, who share the same reality in which opinions about the product create needs and stimulate purchasing activities.

CHOOSING INFLUENTIALS

Businesses are aware of such a correlation and know that buzz marketing campaigns bring about highly beneficial effects (Hatałska, 2012), therefore people engaged in buzzing, recommending and giving opinions should be carefully chosen.

It depends on the product or service offered to an ultimate buyer, but according to research it also depends on the target group. Businesses sometimes use buzz marketing to build brand awareness, which means that influentials should be chosen in cooperation with PR specialists on the basis of prior marketing research.

The influential should be able to convince other market participants to chose a particular brand, product or service. The influential is tasked with giving opinions and recommendations to facilitate purchase decisions, promoting brand and offer, expressing opinions (mainly positive) about products, recommending a particular offer with reference to his own experience. The Internet is a hypermedia space where influentials can be found. The widespread availability of the Internet allows the spread of information and opinions that may be expressed by all Internet users. It is worth noticing, however, that about 90% of communication and buzzing about businesses and products take place off-line, that is in the real world (Hatałska, 2012). Therefore, buzz marketing must comprise on-line and off-line reality. Only concerted activities can produce positive effects, since these two worlds permeate, cooperate, become involved and both realities can be advantageous to a company. Buzzing in the real world is transferred to a Web 2.0 environment, but informa-

tion gained from the Internet also permeates and evolves in the real world, and is often transferred back to the hypermedia space.

In order to implement buzz marketing strategies, a company must find a suitable influential, who will be susceptible to information provided by the company and willing to pass on this information (Grzegorzyc, 2006). A final choice of influentials should prompt the company to choose mechanisms for reaching chosen influentials. These mechanisms may include the following activities (Siejak, 2011): product sampling, inviting for exclusive actions, product seeding, as well as reaching influentials through their blogs. Such activities aim at passing on information (or sometimes the product itself) to chosen influentials and encouraging them to recommend the products and create consumer needs.

There are a number of ways to find suitable people willing to act as influentials both in the real world and in a Web 2.0 environment. Andy Sernovitz lists seven types of interlocutors, among whom the most valuable for a company can be found (Sernovitz, 2011):

- customers satisfied with their purchases,
- employees satisfied with their work in a particular company,
- trademark fans,
- Internet users,
- normal listeners,
- hobbyists and fans,
- professionals.

Each group contains people who are willing to share, without any expected profits, information with others and to give recommendations. Thus, they create added value, which forms the basis for today's marketing communication between a business and its customers. For marketing-oriented companies, which look after customer relations, recommendations become components of marketing communication with customers. It has been observed that recommendations may lead to establishing long-term relations (Jantsch, 2011), which in turn makes them one of the best marketing tools in the long term.

It is worth mentioning that satisfied customers will return to the company, and they must be properly looked after to feel important and needed. If they are contented with the company's products or services, they will share this information with others soon. Customers tend to boast about their purchases, so they will circulate the information very soon. Apparently, the opinions may not relate to the product or service itself, they may refer to service or handling complaints (paradoxically, product or service complaints may evoke positive opinions on condition that the complaints are resolved to customer's advantage).

The same refers to eager employees, who are proud of being part of a company, willingly express their positive opinion about the company and share the information about it with their family, friends or customers. It has to be remembered, however, that not every satisfied employee is eager to pass on information about his/her company to others. However, careful observation may help choose individuals who will be pleased to share their positive opinions with others.

Undoubtedly, there exists a large group of followers among the so-called logo fans, i.e. individuals who are fond of logos printed on t-shirts, caps, bags, neck straps etc. The person who wears and is proud of wearing the logo, will definitely be willing to share information about a particular company with his/her friends. Wearing the logo or using products with a particular logo is a sign of belonging to a particular social group (sometimes very exclusive) and creates the need for identification with the company. Companies are therefore obliged to distribute promotional gadgets to logo fans and to cater for the need for belonging to a given group.

The Internet is the space where influentials should be sought. First, a satisfied customer expresses his positive opinion online. It should be noted here that the customer was willing to devote his/her time to

give a positive opinion about the product and to recommend it. Companies should aim at finding such customers, since they have higher motivation, which in turn makes them interlocutors (Sernovitz, 2011). It is worth mentioning that according to the latest research by European Trusted Brands, more than 60% of Polish people do not trust in messages transmitted by media. It mainly refers to radio, television and press. The Internet, as the only interactive medium, is trusted by almost 56% of the respondents. It is therefore necessary to cater for influential messages in a Web 2.0 environment, as best recommendations are given by Internet users themselves. Finding an influential is the most important task necessary for effective online buzzing and recommending. Interaction and interpersonal networking make a brand, product or service noticed and remembered. But most of all, the information about them is quickly passed on.

A. Sernovitz listed normal listeners as potential influentials. According to him, people who like and can listen, are also willing to talk and indeed talk most (Sernovitz, 2011). Therefore the conclusion can be drawn that if a consumer listens attentively to opinions about a particular brand or products, he/she will probably be willing to discuss the company and its offer and give recommendations. Selecting active 'listeners' on the Internet does not make any difficulties – it requires analysing the statistics and select users who pass the information received from a company to others. This activity can be regarded as a form of discussion in the virtual world.

Hobbyists and brand fans are a specific group of companies' interlocutors. Importantly, they do not have to be company's customers and they do not have to own any products offered by this company, sometimes due to financial reasons. However, they regard talking about products they appreciate as belonging to the social group whose members own the product. This is the case of luxury brands of cars, new technologies, or sophisticated services. Inability to buy a product (often because of financial reasons) does not determine their activities promoting the brand, since talking itself is the source of satisfaction.

Professionals are a completely different type of potential influentials, because they find nothing unusual in communicating, conveying information, giving opinions and recommendations. They are, however, highly skeptical as to expressing their opinions and commenting since their opinions must be verified and reliable. If their assessment of reality (here: brand, product, services) were inadequate, they would lose reliability (Sernovitz, 2011) on which their professionalism is based. These professional interlocutors are usually journalists, critics, authors of specialist publications, experts, professional bloggers, columnists. They are suspicious by nature and verify all information carefully. They are insightful, fair and trustworthy and therefore their recommendations are considered reliable.

CONCLUSIONS

It is well known that customers are affected by people from their immediate environment when they make purchase decisions. According to research (conducted by the author of the article in June 2012 with the use of a questionnaire), the decision process referring to buying fast-rotating products such as milk, bread, coffee, mainly foodstuffs, family members and friends are most influential (for 43% of the respondents). 43% of the respondents decide on their own. The research conducted in the same group of respondents concerning purchases of bigger value (a car, a computer, etc.) has shown that 32% of consumers ask their immediate environment for recommendations, while 23% of the respondents decide on their own. Therefore, if the consumer's choice is based on previous experience one can assume that his/her knowledge could have been acquired through influentials, and this fact might have been forgotten or not recorded by the customer. The customer may remember the message conveyed by the influential at the moment of

purchase. The above supports the need for influentials, who can influence a great number of consumers by appropriate recommendation of brand and products.

All mentioned groups mentioned above are company's interlocutors who include genuine, reliable and fair influentials. They are essential for building an efficient network of connections with a viral spread of opinions about the company. Thanks to activities undertaken by influentials, preferences of potential customers are formed and brand awareness is increased. It is therefore important to form a group comprising of influentials instead of contacting individual influentials individually. The best solution is to rely on a group of influentials that consists of individuals of different backgrounds and environments, operating on-line and off-line, different people with one aim in mind, that is to promote and recommend.

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