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Word-of-Mouse: Lessons for Business-to-Business Marketers

By Brian Davies, Partner, Movéo Integrated Branding

Like their consumer counterpart, business-to-business brands are only as good as a customer experience with them. The difference today is that the Internet affords customers lots of ways of communicating those experiences to their peers. Consequently, they're influencing marketing strategy as never before.

More and more, there are less and less places where brand owners exclusively control content. This is especially true on the web. Blogs are just one example of how the Internet is creating a world driven by "Word-of-Mouse." Business-to-business marketers have always recognized the importance of word-of-mouth, but the Internet enlarges the scale on which it operates. Why spend thousands telling millions how great your company is if there are hundreds quietly telling them the opposite?

Word-of-Mouse is more compelling than ever today because it's not just words, but images (increasingly moving ones, thanks to YouTube, etc.). When a video of a Dell computer self-combusting appeared online, it spread like wildfire (pun intended) in a way word-of-mouth would never have achieved pre-Internet. Not to pick on Dell, but the company also recently suffered in the blogosphere when serious customer-service issues surfaced—and then multiplied.

We believe this phenomenon — a kind of Industrial Strength Web 2.0 — represents nothing less than a fundamental shift in the nature of business-to-business relationships. Brand owners are no longer the sole masters of their messaging. Business-content consumers are online, sharing thoughts and information, and taking away control from brand and media owners.

Let's face it, business-to-business buyers are savvy—they fully understand the marketing game. They resent being patronized, they hate

the old corporate clichés and they won't stand for hyperbole. Companies really do need to ensure that they deliver on their promises and that their brands stay relevant. They need to enter into a dialogue with customers, not a monologue. Most importantly, brand owners must recognize that they no longer have (and never will have again), the same level of control they once enjoyed.

Did you know?

The Last Lafley?

At the annual conference of the Association of National Advertisers last October, Procter & Gamble Co. CEO A.G. Lafley went so far as to urge companies to "let go" of their brands (to underscore the point, he then proceeded to show an animated Pringles commercial made by a teenager). For those unfamiliar with the controlling ways of P&G, this equivalent of marketing heresy should serve as a wake-up call to the rising power of Word-of-Mouse.

In the Word-of-Mouse World, measuring the effectiveness of advertising will become increasingly difficult. Not because the quantitative tracking capabilities that we all love will suddenly become less valuable. Rather, it is the Internet's ability to spread messages on a one-to-one basis en masse that has the potential to build—or undermine—brands more quickly than ever.

In such a world, marketing planners will need to stop thinking about campaigns purely from an exposure-and-response point of view. They will need to look at how ideas can engage customers,

then go on and create positive Word-of-Mouse. More often than not, viral elements will need to be incorporated into campaigns if they are to achieve their true potential.

Word-of-Mouse will also create a new planning discipline that will work in concert with more traditional media planning (Movéo already has a Director of Emerging Media on staff). In the near future, this discipline will be required to increasingly monitor — not just measure — the web and particularly the blogosphere. Understanding what customers are saying about your brand and then aiming to influence this debate will be the new challenge. This discipline will require a novel combination of skills — research, branding, creativity, interactive media with customer service and old-fashioned journalism thrown in for good measure.

The new tools of the trade? Conversational marketing (responding to comments, both positive and negative, and incorporating customer feedback into marketing planning), podcasting, wikis and even social networking. Last fall, Microsoft launched Aggregat8, a social networking and collaboration space for the IT community. Now Global Spec has officially announced CR4, a forum for engineers, scientists and technical researchers to discuss engineering news, seek technical help and get answers.

Only time will tell whether these predictions will come true, but one thing seems certain — business-to-business marketers will increasingly embrace Word-of-Mouse in their quest to connect with customers and build brand-loyal communities of users.

Have a branding challenge that you'd like help with? Contact Brian Davies at 630-570-4802 now or visit us online at www.moveo.com



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