

Buzz Marketing -- the Easy Way to Generate Word of Mouth

Take these four steps to strengthen your business.

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Friday night. Washington Street in Hoboken.

A huge line snakes around the new Ben and Jerry's ice cream store. I see a friend in the crowd and wave to her. She yells across the crowd, "Hey, Ilise, come and get your free cone."

I didn't see any advertising for this. How did all these people know? Turns out "free cone day" was all over the Web.

Buzz. It can make you or break you.

But what is this elusive thing called "buzz" or "word of mouth?"

Simply put, it's what people talk about, the currency of conversation. And you can proactively get the word out there and give them something to talk about, which increases your visibility and, in turn, leads qualified prospects to your door (or your Web site).

First, you need to understand what makes buzz marketing so effective: It's trust, or lack of trust, actually.

You see, trust is eroding. There's so much hype and scandal in our culture that we just don't believe what companies say about themselves anymore. Meanwhile, we do believe what others say about those same companies. Those "others" include the people in the media, our beloved experts and celebrities, but also friends and colleagues.

So how do you get buzz?

Focus your attention on the "opinion leaders" or "hubs" in your market. These are folks who serve as sources of information and influence to your prospects and clients. They are often specialists on a topic and people listen to them because of their expertise and credentials.

For example, if your prospects and clients are corporate marketing types, who do they read? Who do they listen to? Who would they pay big bucks to hear speak at a conference? This "opinion leader" doesn't have to be a star. He or she just needs to have influence over the right people.

Once you've identified the opinion leaders for your market, start a dialogue by responding to something they have said or done. Give your opinion. Send a book or a chocolate bar. Do they publish a newsletter or blog in which you could get a mention? The short answer is "yes," and that's where buzz begins.

Beyond reaching the opinion leaders that your market listens to, here are four simple things you can do to generate buzz:

- **Identify your best advocates.** Focus on the people who believe most strongly in the superiority of your services. They may be your customers or your employees, and they are in the strongest position to spread the word. Help them by recognizing them with awards, certificates, and gift cards. Offer them visibility by

featuring them in your marketing. Also, provide tools -- your business cards, brochures, and other information -- to make it easier for them to spread the word.

- **Give prospects a taste.** You can get a tremendous amount of marketing mileage from a generous sampling program because allowing people to experience your services makes it easier for them to spread the word. Since you are marketing intangible services, your "sample" could be a critique of their existing materials or Web site or a free consultation. (Be careful not to give too much away.)
- **Gather and use testimonials.** When someone offers a compliment, ask what it is specifically about your work or your process that had the strongest impact on them. Then ask, "Do you mind if I use your comments as a testimonial?" Make asking for testimonials a standard part of your evaluation process. Then plaster those testimonials everywhere (your Web site, sales letters, business card, everywhere).
- **Encourage viral marketing.** Here's another way to respond to a compliment about your services: "Would you mind telling a few people about us?" Add a "tell a friend" link to every email message, email newsletter, or Web page with useful information. Put the phrase, "Please forward," in the subject line as well as in the text of your messages.

So you see, there is a lot you can do besides sitting around waiting for the referrals to roll in. If you know how to spread the word about your services, the clients you attract will arrive at your door already convinced they need what you're offering. And all you will need to do is close the sale.

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