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 ...THE CUSTOMER BLOG. WORD OF MOUTH  
 ...AM AND EVE IN EDEN, HOW  
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# Get the



This is the second story in *Marketing News'* ongoing "Get in the Game" series that delivers cost-conscious marketing applications for marketers to use in the recession and beyond.

## > IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS WORD OF MOUTH.

After all, it was Eve's endorsement that convinced Adam to take a bite of that forbidden apple, not some advertising campaign, says Ben McConnell, co-author of *Creating Customer Evangelists: How Loyal Customers Become a Volunteer Sales Force* and the Church of the Customer blog. The power of word of mouth has been with us since the dawn of time. Today, it's becoming a key tool for marketers wanting to organically and economically get the word out.

"Having a fundamental understanding of word of mouth has never been more crucial," the Austin, Texas-based McConnell says. "With budgets being cut, you need every competitive advantage you can get, and word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing essentially gives you an understanding of your position in the marketplace." It's not just declining budgets that should be steering marketers to use WOM, however.

Consumers are spending less today, that's a given. But there's also a different consumer mindset associated with reduced spending, says Ed Keller, CEO of the Keller Fay Group and former president of the board of directors of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association. "You get to difficult economic times and all of a sudden people have to reconsider all sorts of things. 'Where am I going to shop?' 'What food am I going to eat?' 'What am I going to do for vacation this year?' It begins to change the nature of the conversations we have with people," the New Brunswick, N.J.-based Keller says.

"The days where you can cover a weak product or weak campaign by dumping money on ads are long over," says Andy Sernovitz, CEO of Chicago-based WOM consultancy firm GasPedal LLC, and author of the book *Word of Mouth Marketing: How Smart Companies Get People Talking*. "You've got to find a way to get your fans to help you out in this kind of market. You have no other option."

### Start talking

Dave Balter, CEO for the Boston-based WOM marketing firm BzzAgent Inc., agrees. "Marketing *with* is much more important than marketing *at* right now."

That certainly seems to be what BzzAgent client Boston Market Corp. believes. The Golden, Colo.-based restaurant chain this year plans to increase its WOM spending by 30% compared with 2008, says Angela Proctor, senior director of communications and field marketing. "[WOM] is really like

an accelerator," Proctor says. "It ignites people back to understanding more about what makes your brand different."

Last July, while working on a campaign for Boston Market, BzzAgent reached out to 4,000 volunteers, primarily women, in five major markets, and gave them suggested talking points, incentives for eating at Boston Market and coupons for four friends. The primary goal was to reintroduce female consumers to the restaurant's all-natural chicken and turkey dishes, which are positioned as healthier alternatives to fast food fare, Proctor says.

The eight-week campaign reached approximately 262,621 people, according to BzzAgent data, which exceeded initial estimates by more than 63,000 people. More than 80% of those initially contacted indicated they would go to Boston Market again, a change of 52% from before the campaign.

"We wanted to know how specific messages would resonate with [consumers] and motivate them to use Boston Market more often," Proctor says, adding that the BzzAgent campaign was like "having a focus group of 4,000 with really rich data."

Even though recession talk grew more heated in November, BzzAgent carried out a catering-centered campaign for Boston Market that lasted through early February. Results for that campaign were not available at press time.

BzzAgent doesn't disclose specific campaign costs, but Balter says a 10,000 agent campaign costs roughly \$300,000.

Effective campaigns can run for even less, Sernovitz argues. For \$50,000, a company can have one employee focus on customer service and another create inexpensive viral assets, for example.

At Sharpie, the marker brand owned by Atlanta-based Newell Rubbermaid Inc., Twitter is proving an effective WOM tool. By late last year, social media campaigns were running at company partners Graco and Rubbermaid, says Susan Wassel, public relations manager for Newell Rubbermaid Office Products. Wassel wanted the same social media assets for Sharpie but did not have a large amount of resources available. In fact, one of the company's primary marketers had been let go because of downsizing.

Nevertheless, Wassel felt the cause was too important to ignore; she readjusted her work schedule to spare an hour a day for blogging and tweeting—how Twitter users refer to putting out a message on the free micro-messaging platform. Sharpie now has 400 followers on Twitter. Wassel's colorful blog, showcasing Sharpie-inspired artwork and

# WORD out

BY PIET LEVY//STAFF WRITER

WORD OF MOUTH IS A PERFECT TOOL FOR MARKETING IN TODAY'S ECONOMY, ADVOCATES ARGUE. SHARPIE, THE MAYO CLINIC, BOSTON MARKET AND OTHERS ARE PROVING IT.

celebrity Sharpie sightings, received 10,000 visits in its first two months. The extra cost? The bottom line was just shy of \$2,000, and most of that was spent on the blog masthead design, Wassel says.

"These are community tools that we wanted to absolutely be a part of, but it also happens that the economy is what it is and we are operating on somewhat slimmer budgets, so the two converged in a good way at the right time," Wassel says. "It's a matter of dipping your toe in the water. If I waited for all the stars to align, I'd still be sitting here."

## What's the good word?

Matt McGowan, vice president and publisher of the interactive marketing arm of London-based B-to-B media group Incisive Media Ltd., says three years ago his staff invested fewer than 10 hours a week on social media. Today, staffers invest up to five or six hours a day on blogs, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. The results have been so impressive that this year McGowan is cutting time spent on more expensive direct mail marketing to devote more time to WOM tactics instead.

McGowan says social media is directly driving results. The company was able to trace \$100,000 in event registrations back to social media sites for a recent Chicago seminar about search engine optimization. Site traffic on one of Incisive Media's properties, SearchEngineWatch.com, increased 15% in 2008 compared with 2007.

"Now that the floodgates are open, I don't think there is any going back," McGowan says. "People expect a level of customer service they didn't get before." In other words, because McGowan's customers have a direct link to Incisive Media, there is more goodwill toward the company and its services.

The Mayo Clinic—with campuses in Minnesota, Arizona and Florida—has understood the positive benefits of strong word of mouth throughout its 100-year-plus history in the medical field, so its recent efforts to step up WOM activities come as little surprise. A 2006 study showed that 84% of patients were influenced to go to the Mayo Clinic because of

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word of mouth. Lee Aase, Mayo's manager of syndications and social media, says that 25% of Mayo's patients come from more than 500 miles away.

In the fall of 2005, Mayo started exploring low-cost ways to enhance WOM through social media. The first effort required little work: The Clinic started offering its already syndicated *Medical Edge* radio show as a free podcast on iTunes.

By July 2007, the podcast transformed into 10- to 25-minute segments featuring interviews with healthcare experts available under six themed categories. Podcasts in each category were released every one to four weeks.

Four months later, Mayo established its Facebook page, which now has more than 5,000 connections that the site classifies as friends. A vast majority of the messages left on the page are heartfelt expressions of gratitude, such as one from Tanys Ulmer of Fargo, N.D., who wrote that the hospital staff "saved my daddy."

The company established four blogs in the past year. The latest, launched in January, features stories and videos of the Mayo Clinic's staff and patients. Mayo also launched its own YouTube channel featuring videos about new research and treatment methods last May.



< Online hotbeds of WOM include sites like Facebook and Twitter.

Aase says about three employees are fully devoted to spreading WOM through online outlets, with 15 more people in public affairs making contributions. Aside from staffing costs, spending is minimal. Because Mayo is non-profit, the YouTube channel is free. Each blog costs less than \$100 a year to operate. The video and audio featured on multiple Web sites are taken with a Flip Video Camcorder, which only cost the clinic \$150, Aase says, and the results have been professional enough to be used by *The Wall Street Journal* and CBS Radio.

Aase says he does not quantify results publicly, and he admits the company does not have a complete picture of how many patients came following exposure to social media content. But he argues that the expense is too low, and the benefits too great, not to engage in WOM online.

"Even if a person does not have an immediate need for medical care, they will have gotten answers that were helpful to them at no incremental cost to us," he says. "If we can provide that information, when the time does come that somebody has a need, we will be among the places they consider."

McConnell says social media has even generated goodwill toward the unlikeliest of places: the auto industry.

Last year, Ford Motor Co. hired Scott Monty to be its official online spokesman. A heavy user of Twitter, Monty now has north of 11,000 followers and follows more than 10,000 other accounts. Consequently, words of respect for Ford have spread from blog to blog.

"I've seen Scott neutralize bad buzz very quickly either about the bailout or green issues," McConnell says. "It's easy to criticize an entity where there's no public face or person involved. But if a person responds to you, that negative energy is neutralized and can even become positive energy."

Thanks to social media-driven WOM, Ford was able to score some kudos for appeasing customers at a time when likeability was crashing.

At the same time, sales didn't exactly accelerate.

McConnell stresses that WOM is just one component to an effective marketing message, albeit an important one. The secret sauce, he argues, is long-term dedication.

"The companies that accelerate what they're doing right now in categories like listening and social media will have a head start over their competitors," McConnell says. "Once the economy picks up again, it's only going to help them." **m**