

Digital World

Spreading the Word

Influential consumers can be your best marketers

by Jennifer J. Salopek

“YOU DON’T OWN YOUR BRAND. Consumers own your brand, and they can make or break your business every day. Forget what you think you know about marketing.”

With these radical statements, Steve Hershberger, principal of ComBlu, a community strategy firm based in Chicago, ushers us into 2009. A new approach seems appropriate as we begin a new year in the midst of a recession and an uncertain outlook on how and whether consumers worldwide will spend their discretionary income. The good news is: with a well thought out word-of-mouth marketing strategy, your park or attraction can be top of mind if and when consumers do decide to spend.

“Word-of-mouth marketing has been around longer than print com-

munication,” observes Myra Norton, chief executive officer at Baltimore-based Community Analytics LLC. “It is much harder to take a data-driven marketing approach within the business-to-consumer space. Rather, people make decisions based on the opinions of the people they talk with.”

Word-of-mouth marketing has become a formal discipline. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association, (WOMMA), has taken the lead in documenting best practices, setting standards, conducting research, and establishing ethics guidelines. Its web site, www.womma.org, hosts useful information for those new to the practice.

Whether novice or experienced in word-of-mouth marketing, however, Hershberger emphasizes you must be in

Word-of-mouth marketing

Giving people a reason to talk about your products and services, and making it easier for that conversation to take place. —WOMMA.org



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it for the long haul. “Tapping influencers is not a [marketing] campaign; it is a long-term strategy,” he says. “Once you decide to adopt that strategy, you must stay the course.”

Tapping influencers is the name of the game in word-of-mouth marketing. Norton defines them as the people who are on the cutting edge—who have a finger on the pulse of the industry. Certainly, leaders of roller coaster enthusiast groups spring to mind, but there will be others. “[Those people] may not be immediately obvious via online or traditional measurement tools,” Norton says. Rather, you must go to places where coaster enthusiasts (or mini-golf enthusiasts, or whoever) congregate, and ask them.

Say, “Who helped fuel your interest in this pastime?” Get specific names. Try to identify patterns or areas of geographic or online concentration. But the main thing, advises Hershberger, is to start with a blank slate, and to listen.

“Visitors to amusement parks and attractions come seeking an experience or an outcome. Therefore, parks and attractions must try to find out why visitors are coming,” he says.

Most word-of-mouth marketing programs can begin with three simple steps:

1. Ask your best customers what their opinions are, and why.
2. Ask yourself, does our infrastructure match the consumers’ impression of the park or attraction?
3. If it doesn’t, counter that inquiry by asking, are there changes we can make so it does?

Norton also recommends establishing a quid pro quo. “Reciprocity is a basic human instinct,” she notes. “It’s what word-of-mouth marketing should be about: Your brand does something to serve the community.” For example, influencers who share their opinions with you might receive free or discounted admission, or even special early-opening hours at the attraction.

“You can’t force it, however. Don’t pay people. You must be genuine. Influencers are influential, after all, because they are unbiased,” she says. That lack of bias also means you must be prepared for negative feedback—but how you respond to that feedback can make all the difference.

Never censor the negative responses, says Hershberger. Rather, look at the root cause of the complaint, then figure out how to fix the issue or explain why you can’t.

“Brands should be able to admit mistakes, or admit when we don’t know the answer,” he says. “Get the answer, fix the problem, and report your findings.” In this way, you can unleash customers to uncover the weaknesses in your park or attraction.

“That’s the world we live in now—consumers control the brand,” concludes Norton. “These conversations are happening. Are you going to be a part of them?”

Positive Word-of-Mouth Marketing Strategies

Strong word-of-mouth marketing strategies involve finding ways to support satisfied customers and make it easier for them to talk to their friends:

1. Encourage Communications

- Develop tools to make telling a friend easier
- Create forums and feedback tools
- Work with social networks

2. Give People Something to Talk About

- Make available information that can be shared or forwarded
- Encourage conversation with advertising, PR events, and other publicity
- Work with product development to build word-of-mouth elements into products

3. Create Communities and Connect People

- Create user groups and fan clubs
- Support independent groups that form around your product
- Host discussions and message boards about your products
- Enable grassroots organizations such as local meetings and other real-world participation

4. Work with Influential Communities

- Find people likely to respond to your message
- Identify people who can influence your target customers
- Inform these individuals about what you do and encourage them to spread the word
- Make good-faith efforts to support issues and causes important to these individuals

5. Create Evangelist or Advocate Programs

- Provide recognition and tools to active advocates
- Recruit new advocates, teach them about the benefits of your products, and encourage discussion of these benefits

6. Research and Listen to Customer Feedback

- Track online and offline conversations by supporters, detractors, and neutrals
- Listen and respond to both positive and negative conversations

7. Engage in Transparent Conversation

- Encourage two-way conversations with interested parties
- Create blogs and other tools to share information
- Participate openly on online blogs and discussions

8. Encourage Information Sharing and Customer Input

- Involve consumers in marketing and creative (ask for feedback on creative campaigns, allow them to create commercials, etc.)
- Let customers “behind the curtain” to have first access to information and content

Source: “Word of Mouth 101,” womma.org.