

Moving from Advertising to Advocacy

By: Christine Holland, Partner

Good advertising should drive the consumer towards an action. In this era of ultimate connectedness and unlimited information about brands, a key role of advertising should also be to 'advocate advocacy', driving your supporters to talk about and ultimately to recommend your brand. Recommendations used to be what neighbors would talk about over the fence or co-workers at the coffee pot; multiply that by a billion and you've got the wealth of recommendations and reviews developing on the Internet. Most sites have a "Review It" capability, led by E-Bay's renowned process. This is changing the way people make purchasing decisions. In today's age, your consumer can be your best salesperson.

According to research done by Weber Shandwick, there is a significant gap, as much as 50%, between those who SAY they will recommend your brand and those who actually do. In general, marketers tend to be over-confident about their brand's appeal, believing that their brand offers an exceptional experience, when only about 10% of their customers agree.

The stakes are high. Some estimates claim that nearly two-thirds of the economy is driven by personal recommendations, which are rated as the #1 influence on purchase decisions across both B2B and B2C sectors. According to the European Advocacy Study, nearly 90% of advocates say they write online reviews to help others make better buying decisions and more than 70% are motivated to help companies improve products.

Here are a few tips to think about in building a Word of Mouth strategy.

1. Target the few.

As Malcolm Gladwell explains in *The Tipping Point*, the people to reach are the opinion leaders who can influence others. While this has always been the case to some extent, it is particularly true when it comes to Internet users since only 25% of Internet users share links with their friends and far fewer (2%) are willing to actually make and share their own content. Key influencers have shifted from the traditional mass media, one-to-many, to a targeted audience that communicates regularly and intimately with a small group. When Ford Motor Company wanted to create awareness of their environmental strategy and the Escape, they used targeted ads in high profile newspapers to reach an influential demographic group. They secured 60,000 registrants to a dedicated site and estimated that 70% of these were new to the brand, advocating their discovery to their respective groups.

2. Align with the brand identity.

Often brands do not employ a Word of Mouth Marketing strategy that links to the brand promise. Fundamentally, the overall brand experience is what motivates advocacy. A brand is a promise that the product will deliver an expected set of functional, emotional and social benefits. Creating opportunity for your customers to experience your brand increases their emotional involvement. For example, kitchens are all about cooking, so appliance showrooms are incorporating live installations to bring the kitchen, the food, and the customer together, then providing an opportunity for customers to give feedback and share their experiences.

3. Involve employees.

Employees are a built-in core of people who already have a relationship with the brand. Think about how you can provide incentives to them to advocate the brand to their individual networks. A mini Public Relations training can be highly effective. Give your employees some guidelines for blogging and key talking points for the company's initiatives so they can incorporate these into their online chatter. Online shoe retailer Zappos.com started using Twitter as a tool to engage their employees and build their company culture and found it to be a great tool for recruiting, as well as a way to connect with their customers and promote their core values.

4. Be open and build the relationship.

Marketers worry about negative comments and wonder if they should edit their blogs. Bloggers respect transparency, and your response to negative comments is actually a great way to build a relationship with the consumer. Treat negative feedback as you would a complaint and address it. Resolving problems and showing that the company is listening to and using the feedback is a key step toward building fans who will actively spread the word.

In this day and age, every company should think about how to incorporate a Word of Mouth strategy into their marketing and Internet plans. In addition to the 'lack of control' concerns addressed above, the other key reason marketers shy away from these tools is a general lack of measurable results. While we always struggle to demonstrate tangible results from advertising, particularly within a budget/planning cycle, the key measure that advocacy efforts can move is a Net Promoter Score (developed by Bain & Company in 2003), which should be added to any brand equity measures. NPS is often misunderstood to be simply positive minus negative, when actually the true advocates are those who respond with 9 or 10 when asked if they would recommend your brand, minus the detractors who rate it 1-6, with 7-8 considered neutral.

Overall, the opportunity for brands that can effectively drive recommendations is significant. Go back to that statistic that says that only half of your potential advocates actually DO recommend the brand – it is worth the effort to encourage them to do so. Offer your existing customers incentives and a heart-felt thank you for referrals. The type of incentive will depend on your brand and can range from a discount for online referrals to a refund for every referral that makes a purchase to some type of upgrade. You may even want to engage your customers in developing the program by asking what incentive they would most value.

Encouraging, addressing, and rewarding customer involvement with your brand can and will bring increased awareness and acceptance in the marketplace and build an enduring relationship with both your customers and their networks. Why not make your customers your best salespeople?

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