



How to Spark a Conversation

Q: Everyone says word-of-mouth marketing is the best form of marketing, but how do you actually create it?

A: Word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing has always been very powerful, but today's technology and culture make it a particularly ripe time to harvest its power. The primary way to get the most out of WOM marketing is to recognize it is very different from other types of marketing. It's less about creating a new campaign and more about cultivating something that already exists. Also, it depends less on spending money and more on sparking movements.

With so many tools available, you may be tempted to start generating ideas based on the capabilities of social media or a digital app. But it's most important to get *who* and *what* right before you move to *how*.

Who is about determining which people you should engage in WOM. While ultimately you want to reach your target customers, WOM is often most effective when it first engages internal people and influencers. Your employees are probably your best brand advocates if you've hired and trained them well, so you may want to pursue efforts that get them talking and sharing first. Think about people who have the most influence on your target, too. If you're seeking high school athletes, team captains and lettermen are the arbiters of cool for your target. If your target is moms with young kids, influencers might be popular bloggers and media celebrities who they often turn to for advice and ideas. Design your WOM to engage these influencers first and you'll see the conversations take off.

Also consider the *what*—meaning, what topic your WOM should be about. It sounds so basic, but it's worth pointing out that WOM marketing needs to tap into things people want to talk about, and that usually doesn't include your restaurant. We have to remember people don't wake up with a burning desire to share about businesses.

According to the smart folks at the agency Brains on Fire who wrote the book *The Passion Conversation: Understanding, Sparking, and Sustaining Word of Mouth Marketing*, there are three motivations that spark conversations about brands:

- 1. Functional:** People want to get and give information needed to make decisions and better interpret the world around them;
- 2. Social:** People share in order to impress others, express their uniqueness, and/or to somehow enhance their reputations;
- 3. Emotional:** People want to express excitement (or disgust) about something—something they feel passionate about.

Your WOM marketing should facilitate conversations that tap into one or more these.

Consider how Anytime Fitness, a large fitness club fran-

chise, uses WOM. Like other clubs, Anytime is challenged by low participation rates; only 15 percent of Americans belong to a gym, and many of those don't go to the gym regularly. To make fitness-club membership more accessible and relevant, Anytime initiated a "Fitness Rebellion." The mission is to change the fitness conversation from topics like reps and muscles and give a voice to all the non-gym rats who are more interested in life fitness. The Fitness Rebellion creates community by focusing on "Little Wins" and celebrating everyday accomplishments.

Anytime recruited Fitness Rebellion Community Leaders from their existing legion of club owners, staff, and trainers, and invited them to deepen their relationships with members and their local communities by recognizing accomplishments, however small. These leaders use "Kicking BUT" cards to reward members who have refused to make excuses for not going to the gym. Some have organized "No-Fun-Runs," while others have put up whiteboards that spotlight "Fitness Rebel" members. They encourage members and non-members alike to post success stories on the Fitness Rebellion Facebook page.

Coca-Cola uses a storytelling approach for its WOM efforts. In one campaign, the company created a Happiness Machine to reinforce the brand idea that Coke is really "happiness in a bottle." The Happiness Machine looked like a regular vending machine, but the machine dispensed goodies including flowers, pizzas, and even a sub sandwich, along with lots of free bottles of Coke. It first appeared on the campus of St. John's University in New York, and the delighted reactions of unsuspecting college students were captured on video by hidden cameras.

Coke published a YouTube video of the Happiness Machine and posted a single message on its Facebook page and Twitter account. That's all it took for people to discover the video and start passing it along. In its first week, it got one million views. And because the video ended with the question, "Where Will Happiness Strike Next?," it created a buzz factor in the form of anticipating where the Happiness Machine would show up.

Both of these examples embody the principles that are key to generating effective WOM:

- **Ensure you're on-brand:** Ground WOM in your core brand identity and values—just because an idea is cool doesn't mean it's right for your brand;
- **Be authentic:** Facilitate real conversations about real people;
- **Don't force it:** Let conversations happen organically—if something is share-worthy, it will be shared;
- **Connect emotionally:** Tap into people's feelings;
- **Put the spotlight on people, not your brand:** Remember people want to share about themselves. 