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Guest Column

Marketing by Word-of-Mouse

Communication Lessons from Blue Eyes, a Pop Diva and the Blair Witch

By **Brian Solis**

Over the last several years marketing theories and strategies have been tweaked, "Mickey -Moused," and "duck taped" in order to compete for hard-won visibility in the new 'e -economy.'

Campaigns got louder and more irrelevant and after all, if you worked with an emerging tech start-up, you had to compete with a wildly popular sock puppet for attention.

Traditional, market-proven strategies could only be tapped to deliver static and unimpressive results. In the absolute height of self indulgent, but often clever dot-com marketing, brilliant and ultra-creative strategies were required to rise above the noise.

Thus marketing in the Internet era required yet another evolution in its principles in order to generate equal or greater presence. Combining the lessons learned from new e-economy marketing with good old-fashioned missionary marketing provided an opportunity for marcom and communications professionals to get back to basics while driving markets to action rather than just brand association.

He Marketed His Way

Frank Sinatra did this when he decided he was ready to leave the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra to launch his solo career. Others before had tried and failed, so Frank and team decided to launch grassroots marketing initiatives to generate buzz that would emblazon his solo career. They hired energetic young women to line up outside theaters and fill-up front rows during performances to ensure that his first show was a success. This example of peer-to-peer marketing sent a signal to young music fans around the world that a new star was born.

Today, this kind of grassroots marketing on the Net assumes various identities in diverse industries and most commonly is referred to as mouse-to-mouse, or word-of-mouse marketing (or if you're in Hollywood, "The Blair Witch Effect.") We all know how this story unfolded. Movie marketers planted seeds of curiosity within online movie communities and fan sites, igniting a wildfire of dialogue as to whether or not "The Blair Witch Project" was a Hollywood production or footage from a real story.

Even the music industry incorporates these new Internet marketing tactics to introduce new artists or fuel excitement around established ones. *The Wall Street Journal* documented the ultra-successful debut of pop star Christina Aguilera because of its online grassroots campaign. Marketing executives monitored music and teen fan sites to spark anticipation of the "up and coming" artist that was going to dethrone Brittany Spears. Yes, this was marketeers masquerading as teenyboppers, and it worked. They legitimized their claims and substantiated the word-of-mouth buzz that ultimately greeted Aguilera's first single with great anticipation.



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Want Buzz? Create an Enthusiast.

Technology marketers bespoke this age-old marketing technique.

This came about years ago with the effort to create "consumer" pull for digital imaging and consumer-related products at a time when companies were trying to move beyond the early adopter category and into the mass markets. I was part of the original team that launched one of the first consumer digital cameras back in 1991. The difference between then and now is the wide acceptance of the Net within general consumer markets. Instead, we used traditional media and publicity venues combined with the (at the time) broad-reaching bulletin boards. Since the boards represented a well-qualified set of tech-savvy users, it was our way of generating buzz within the early market majority.

When Ricoh wanted to sway traditional photographers away from film and into the digital realm, we similarly reached out to the enthusiast 'prosumer' and consumer markets.

We inadvertently uncovered and helped to popularize online photo enthusiast sites such as steves-digicams.com, imaging-resource.com and dcresource.com. We found that working in partnership with these enthusiast communities that we could get our word out directly to potential customers, as long as our news was tailored to their audience - no B.S. or hype allowed. In turn, these sites become the hubs for all things digital imaging and therefore carried much more clout with early adopters than PC Magazine or PC World. News, chats, seminars and even link and banner exchanges became the fundamental components of word-of-mouth marketing.

Some analysts attributed the takeoff of online photo sharing to this strategy of ours - because we generated buzz within the early digital camera user/discussion groups to teach them how to make use of the hundreds upon hundreds of digital images they were now capturing. After all, we too were photography enthusiasts, so our guidance was met with resounding momentum. It's the reason why Club Photo still enjoys market contention in a sea of cash-rich, ad-hungry competition.

We were the helpful and guiding enthusiasts, driving the chat rooms, 'deja news' sites, discussion groups and users' groups. We actually reached out to the public to teach them about everything they needed to know about digital imaging and how to capture and share their pictures. It was like an online version of the touring retail "demo days."

Show Me the ROI

For some marketers, the ROI for online mouse-to-mouse strategies is most prevalent during launches, events or other significant circumstances to generate monumental buzz right away. Sometimes, in the case of Ricoh's digital cameras and Club Photo's online photo processing and sharing, it is the main driver of site traffic in the absence of traditional advertising. Either way, technologists, mainstream marketers and business executives are learning that sometimes the best way to reach potential customers is to reach out directly. The campaign becomes a real-time focus group to monitor, learn, and guide consumers to viable solutions. But be warned! They, too are marketing savvy and are not looking to be sold, but to be educated.

At the end of the day, e-marketing uncovered new, meaningful communication channels. Word on the electronic grapevine is that customers appreciate the attention, as long as it is B.S.-free.

An enthused customer will start a word of mouth campaign to drive additional customers your way. The degree of the outreach and the level of buzz, however, is based on the effectiveness of the initial and ongoing strategy you use to spark that excitement. The goal is to extend the daisy chain of mouse-to-mouse beyond your immediate sphere of influence. One click can equal as much as seven new pairs of eyes reviewing your messaging.

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