

Message 8

Buzz

The Nature of Buzz

Buzz is the sum of all comments about a certain product/service that are exchanged among people at any given time. It is a phenomenon that has been dubbed "explosive self-generating demand."

Buzz is not about elegant advertising or glitz. It's about what happens in the invisible networks -- the interpersonal networks of people associated to the organization that creates the buzz.

The interpersonal networks of customers are of vital importance for an organization because:

- The clutter of messages in traditional promotion outlets can hardly make customers hear an organization's message.
- The abundance of information available for free has made customers sceptical.
- The avalanche of communication means has made customers' inter-connection easier than ever.

The role buzz can have on business depends on:

1. The nature of the product/service.
2. The people that an organization is trying to reach.
3. The people's connectivity.
4. The strategies that are used in the industry.

Network Hubs

Buzz depends on Network Hubs. These are the individuals who communicate with more people about a certain product/service than the average person does. Those are the people who researchers traditionally refer to as "opinion leaders."

Network Hubs can be:

Regular Hubs, i.e. regular people who serve as sources of information and influence others in a certain product/service category.

Mega Hubs, i.e. celebrities, analysts, politicians etc who serve as sources of information and influence thousands of others who listen to

their message via the mass media.

Expert Hubs, i.e. people who are listened to because of what they know.

Social Hubs, i.e. people who are listened to because of their social centrality.

Network Hubs are A.C.T.I.V.E. They are:

- **A**head in the adoption of innovation curb. They are either innovators or early adopters.
- **C**onected.
- **T**ravellers.
- **I**nformation-hungry.
- **V**ocal.
- **E**xposed to the media more than others are.

Principles and Implications in social networks that affect Buzz

Most social networks are invisible

Marketers can hardly see the links of social networks. Marketing activities in the social networks can be invisible as well. Therefore, an organization that focuses on social networks can stealthy gain market share under the radar screen of competitors.

Similar people tend to link

The bigger the similarity of an organization to its stakeholders the more these stakeholders link to it and to each other.

Similar people tend to form clusters

The more an organization's product/service becomes the standard within a cluster, the more difficult competition becomes for competitors. Members of the same cluster reinforce the standard as they communicate to each other.

Information can get trapped in clusters

It is important to identify the gaps between different clusters and to

find ways to spread a message to members of them.

Network Hubs are shortcuts for linking

An organization can deliberately create shortcuts to link with people by using people -- inside or outside it -- who are Network Hubs.

Weak ties can be surprisingly strong

Since people tend to form clusters with similar people who, most likely, will be exposed to the same sources of information, it is important to use Network Hubs that are outside clusters in order to bring in fresh data.

The Internet can create zillions of links

Since it is easier to maintain numerous links online rather than off-line, Buzz's "economy of scale" can have exponential growth online rather than off-line.

The Internet can create unpredictable links

An organization can never know how people in one market category are linked to people in other categories. Therefore, a message in the Internet that is directed to one group can easily find its way to another.

How Buzz spreads

The flow of information about a product/service cannot be separated from the quality of the product/service itself. The best Buzz comes from attributes inherent in the product/service.

Contagious products/services, i.e. those that can inherently accelerate the spread of Buzz, are:

- Products/services that evoke an emotional response.
- Products/services that have a visual impact.
- Products/services that leave traces.
- Products/services the use of which is proportioned to the number of people who are using them.
- Products/services that are compatible to current trends and beliefs.

- Products/services that "do the rest" -- they reinforce the perceptions of simplicity and usability in consumers' minds.

Buzz spreads because of:

Energy: passion, time, and money put behind a product/service.

Credibility: Buzz travels smoothly through channels built on trust. The best Buzz comes from third parties -- not the organization that is the subject of Buzz.

There's hardly any magic prescription for widespread and fast Buzz. However, you should consider that:

- People tend to be receptive to news about products/services that they think they might want to buy.
- Members of a certain cluster tend to adjust their behavior according to the adoption threshold of the cluster, i.e. how many people in the cluster have already bought a product/service.
- Every member of a certain cluster who decides to try a product/service ultimately performs his/her own quality-control test and based on the results decides whether to engage in "word of mouth."
- The higher the risk that is inherent in the product/service the slower the adoption of a new product/service. The slower the adoption of a product/service the more difficult the spread of Buzz.
- Buzz about a product/service never spreads according only to the two-step flow model, i.e. from the organization to the mass media and the mega-hubs and from the mass media and the mega-hubs to the people.
- In relation to the spread of Buzz, the most common traps that an organization can fall in are:
 - (1) Believe that creating and spreading Buzz is all about Network Hubs.
 - (2) Believe that Network Hubs is all about going after an elite group of some influencers instead of going after a broad group of less visible but numerous opinion leaders.
- When you stimulate Buzz you raise expectations. The spread of Buzz depends on the balance between people's expectations and an organization's ability to exceed them. Never overpromise and underdeliver.

Dealing with Network Hubs

There are ways in which an organization can identify and deal with Network Hubs. The goal should be to identify and deal with as many of them as possible. An organization could:

-- Let Network Hubs identify themselves. The opinion leaders would come to the organization seeking information.

-- Identify categories of Network Hubs. Identify opinion leaders who by virtue of their occupation or positioning in the market have higher than average ties with an organization's target audience.

-- Spot Network Hubs in the field. Look for socially active individuals who connect people and transmit information among them.

-- Identify Network Hubs through surveys. Ask people in your target audience to name them who they turn to for information about specific topics.

When you have identified some Network Hubs, then you should:

-- Target Network Hubs first -- they should be the first to know your message.

-- Give Network Hubs enough ammunition -- feed them with sufficient factual information.

-- Stimulate Network Hubs to teach others -- bring them in public online and off-line fora wherein they can generate discussion.

-- Mind that you do not abuse your relationship with Network Hubs.

-- Engage in seeding with your Network Hubs -- make your Network Hubs cognizant of the full experience of your product/service and spread this experience to others through your Network Hubs.

- Seeding goes beyond traditional channels of dissemination.

- Seeding involves putting the product/service in the hands of people.

- Seeding requires the elimination of the price barrier.

- Seeding works well with active listening.

-- Engage in viral marketing with your Network Hubs -- create a structure that will allow your Network Hubs and your target audience to interact with your organization and with each other. The organization's website is an ideal place for interaction when it resembles more a café rather than a subway station. People rush through subway stations while they love to mingle in cafés.

Misconceptions & reality about Buzz

Only outrageous or edgy products are buzz-worthy

Today consumers can have access to an unthinkable of just ten years ago wealth of information that pertains to products/services. An

organization can use this fact in order to generate Buzz through information that refers to products/services that were not buzz-worthy ten years ago.

Managers can assess buzz-worthiness by using two criteria:

- Products ripe in buzz are unique in some respect.
- Products with great buzz potential are usually highly visible.

An organization can create visibility for its products/services by creating forums, such as Internet chat groups, wherein people can exchange information about products/services.

Buzz just happens

Buzz does not just happen but rather is the result of carefully managed marketing programs.

Some of the most powerful tactics for creating and sustaining Buzz are:

- Seed the vanguard, i.e. seed the opinion leaders.
- Exploit people's tendency to want what they -- or others -- do not have.
- Make use of celebrities, movie and television endorsements
- Tap the power of lists.
- Engage in grassroots communication with early adopters who try to convert other people.

The best Buzz-starters are your best customers

The best influencers might come from a counterculture. Finding the best influencers is not possible through marketing techniques that focus solely on what individual consumers think about a product/service and not on how consumers influence one another about a product/service.

To profit from Buzz you must act first and fast

Most organizations do not have the right systems or processes in place to act first and fast in relation to Buzz. In order to profit from it, organizations need to develop an alternative set of practices for tuning into Buzz.

Organizations can tune in by:

- Employing "cool hunters," i.e. individuals who specialize in knowing what's in vogue.
- Setting up chat site in the Internet, thus establishing an efficient

and economical communication environment with people willing to express freely views and trends that might pass unnoticeable for the organization.

The media and advertising are needed to create Buzz

Buzz aims at encouraging people to talk about a product/service or to use it in a way that is noticeable by other people. Buzz is not an overload of advertising. An overload of advertising as well as advertising prematurely can have a negative effect on creating and sustaining Buzz.

References

Emanuel Rosen, *The Anatomy of Buzz*, Currency-Doubleday, 2000.

Renée Dye, *The Buzz on Buzz*, Harvard Business Review, November-December 2000, reprint # R00606.