

Managing Gossip as a “Media”

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Before the Internet, gossip-the passing along of information-was viewed as a bad thing because the original message often became distorted. Women were labeled the biggest “gossipees” even though the term originated in pubs where men, with tankards of ale and time on their hands, gathered to “Go Sip”. Gossip-ors have been perceived as mindless folks with nothing better to do. Today they are labeled by the savvy for what they have become-“Partners in Promotion” or conversely “Partners in De-Motion”.

With the Internet, gossip has become a force for both good and evil and it has several new names: **Word-of-Mouth Marketing (WOM)**, **Consumer Generated Media (CGM)**, or **Viral Marketing (VM)** to name a few. It is the darling or the bane of a company’s existence. Not only can information be passed along, but passed along in its original form and linked to all sorts of supporting evidence. To make matters worse (or better) it never goes away. Type in the magic combination of words into a search engine and you’ll find everything you need to get the ball rolling again.

Why has this happened? What flipped the perception from mindless to meaningful? In a word: MONEY

But the driving force behind this change isn’t coming from corporations, you can’t force Word-of-Mouth or WOM, you can only finesse it. Individuals pass along information when they are so amused, incensed, or impressed that they want to share the moment with a few close friends. For men that means about 2.5 friends, for women, that number is closer to 23.

That last fact has incredible marketing significance so let’s look at it again – women pass information along on the Internet, fax, or mail to about 23 of their pals. And, if you ever checked through the e-pal list, most of those listed are – you guessed it – women. They also do something else; they spread the word in chat rooms or bulletin boards and yes, still face-to-face and phone to phone.

Why? Well, because they can and it’s easy. Over 27 millions women are on line which is about 51% of all Internet users and it’s estimated that women will soon be at the 60% mark. Yahoo Inc. and Starcom Group discovered that the Internet has replaced coffee breaks at work and that women spend more than 40 minutes of their workday for non-work related activities. Add to this their “home-work” of online banking, travel planning, family projects, etc. and women are spending about 3 hours a day on the Internet.

So what’s this have to do with “money”? A lot. On the plus side, savvy marketers can get a lot of free advertising if they can learn how to leverage this WOM media. On the down side, companies can face years of virtual persecution if they tick off this group.

Let’s take Kathie Lee Gifford’s company as an example. In 1995, she came under attack for her clothing line. From a “positioning” point of view, she had it all; a well known and well liked personality and a great sense of style. Like many companies, to make her product line more affordable, she outsourced to manufacturers in other countries. That’s when it hit the financial fan. Someone found out that her company was paying children \$.31 an hour to make her clothes. The chat rooms lit up, the incensed sent emails and the next thing you knew Kathie is confessing that she “had no idea” and “will soon be starting an organization to help prevent global child labor abuse”.

Of course everything I just said could be wrong, but that’s what my Google search just turned up – and it happened 8 years ago! On the Internet, what goes around comes around, and around, and around...

Call it Gossip, WOM, CGM, or VM – if harnessed correctly, it can spread your product’s virtues quickly and for years and at no cost to you. But if you mess up, those same people can turn against you and the “cost” is something that can destroy a company’s name, brand, and bottom line.