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What's THE BUZZ?

BY: LINDA TISCHLER

*Word of mouth is the most potent form of marketing (because it's so authentic). So wouldn't it be great if you could **manufacture** it?*

IN ALABAMA, BzzAgent ArnoldGinger123 buttonholed her probation officer to chat up a lush-flattering new brand of jeans. In Illinois, BzzAgent GeminiDreams spent a family Christmas party extolling the features of Monster.com's new networking site. And, in an especially moving final tribute in New Jersey, BzzAgent Karnj buzzed her grandpa into the great beyond with a round of Anheuser World Select beer at the old gent's wake. "He would have enjoyed the AWS unstoppably!" she wrote in a report to the company that had dispatched her to generate publicity on the brew's behalf.

Companies have long recognized that word of mouth is one of the most potent weapons in a marketer's arsenal. The trick has been to harness that power in a disciplined, strategic way. A two-year-old Boston company, BzzAgent LLC, aims to do just that; it has assembled a nationwide volunteer army of natural-born buzzers and will channel their chatter toward products and services they deem authentically worth talking about. "Our goal was to find a way to capture honest word of mouth," says David Balter, BzzAgent's founder, "and to build a network that would turn passionate customers into brand evangelists."

BzzAgent's method is simple: Once a client signs on, the company searches its database for "agents" matching the demographic and psychographic profile of target

customers of the product or service. Those folks are offered a chance to sign up for a buzz campaign. Volunteers receive a sample product and a training manual for buzz-creating strategies. These may include talking about the product to friends, chatting up salespeople at retail outlets, or emailing influential people on the product's behalf. Each time an agent completes an activity, he is expected to file a report describing the nature of the buzz and its effectiveness. BzzAgent coaches respond with encouragement and feedback on additional techniques.

The company itself is a testament to the power of buzz. Starting with an initial assignment for 300 agents—mostly friends and friends of friends—to generate buzz for an author for Penguin Group publishers, Balter has built a community now 25,000 strong. And these aren't just mall rats on cell phones. Some 65% are over 25, 60% are women, and two are *Fortune* 500 CEOs. They've buzzed products as diverse as Estée Lauder facial masks, Lee Jeans, Rock Bottom Restaurants, and a book by *FAST COMPANY* columnist Seth Godin.

Members—who sign up at the rate of 30 to 100 per day—are typically attracted by the chance to be the first to know about new stuff. Take Rhode Island's Derek Archambault, an early recruit who boasts the low number of BzzAgent #36. He admits he's the kind of guy who just enjoys spreading the gospel about cool new CDs, books, movies, or products. When he heard about BzzAgent, he was instantly hooked. "I thought, Wow! I can do what I'm doing anyway, get some points, and score some free stuff."

While agents do get to keep the new products they promote, and can earn points redeemable for extra loot (typically books, CDs, and promotional items) by filing detailed reports, the network was designed to discourage folks from signing up just to get freebies. Prospective agents must first answer a questionnaire revealing their age, education, interests, and income. Once selected for a campaign, they're asked to read a document on buzz-creating strategies, then report back on their activities by filing online reports. "We made the system just hard enough so that if all you're doing is looking for a free pair of jeans, you've never going to last," says Balter. No cash—or even coupons—ever changes hands.

That didn't discourage Steve Cook, vice president of worldwide strategic marketing at Coca-Cola, from joining. As a marketer, he was intrigued by a tool that helps passionate consumers engage with a product. As a civilian, he was as curious as the next guy to get the inside dish on the next big thing. He's now considering using BzzAgent to generate news and awareness among Coke's core heavy users.

The service's appeal, he says, is its authenticity. "What I like is that Bzzagents aren't scripted," he says. "They say, 'Here's the information; if you believe in it, say whatever you think.'" That distinguishes the company from promoters in, for example, the spirits industry, which has long employed "leaners" to shill brands at a bar. "That type of marketing tool has a very short shelf life," he says. "It's not genuine."

Still, some clients are a little shocked to discover that Bzzagents may not be universally enchanted with their products, and aren't shy about saying so. A large cable company, for example, hired BzzAgent to promote a video game channel. Trouble was, serious

users thought the games were seriously lame. "Why isn't your community faking it?" Balter says the company demanded. "That's the whole point," he replied. "We can help a product that has value. We can't help a product that's schlock."

The company ultimately used Bzzagents' suggestions to retool the game channel. And Balter and his team learned a lesson: Research the product before committing to a campaign. BzzAgent now rejects about 80% of companies that seek to hire it, and refuses to do campaigns for politicians, religious groups, or products it finds offensive. "We wouldn't do anything for Smith & Wesson," says Bzzagent Jon O'Toole, who manages a team of five coaches who wrangle the daily barrage of BzzReports, email, and instant messages.

Hiring this hive of buzzers doesn't come cheap. Deploying 1,000 agents on a 12-week campaign typically runs about \$85,000, exclusive of product samples. But results can be impressive. According to Rick Pascocello, VP of advertising and promotions for the Penguin Group, the Bzzagent community managed to revive *The Art of Shen Kuo*, a book that had gotten lost in the nonstop news blitz following September 11. A year after publication, backed by a preholiday BzzAgent schmoozefest, it sold two-and-a-half times its original printing, a near miracle for a backlist title. And Rock Bottom Restaurants saw sales grow by \$1.2 million in one quarter after 400 members of its frequent-diner program became Bzzagents.

Still, some companies are having a hard time figuring out where this technique fits in their marketing budgets. Is it a media buy or a research tool? And how do you measure its return on investment? That kind of talk exasperates Balter. "We say, you want ROE



How to Generate 100% Pure Buzz

Understand that if it's bogus, it's not buzz.

Word of mouth works only if people genuinely like a product. Don't ask someone to squander his reputation on a turkey.

Trust your grassroots.

Some of the best ideas for buzz activities come from the field. Find a way to share them with the network.

Be open to negative comments.

They can tell you how to improve your product so that it's even more buzzworthy.

from us: return on evangelism.

This is a different beast. Let word of mouth create for you, let it do its thing, let us tell you what's happening, but don't try to compare buzz to a line item on your television spend because it will never work." ■

Senior writer Linda Tischler (tischler@fastcompany.com) buzzes—on her own—about books, movies, and bargains.

