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## Buzz Focus: Conversation Starters

by Dave Balter, November 2005 issue

**WORD OF MOUTH, OR WOM**, just happens to be the most misunderstood medium on the planet. It's not your fault. What you've been told about it is generally inaccurate. I don't want to pretend to be some sort of soothsaying genius or anything. I was just like you: I too once believed what I'd read and what everyone else had told me, most of them ideas that were sexier than reality. But when it comes to understanding WOM, I do have a leg up on most. I've spent the last few years reviewing more than 250,000 authentic WOM narratives written by real people who shared their honest opinions with others. The results are startling.

If you pick up a copy of my new book, *Grapevine: The New Art of Word-of-Mouth Marketing*, you'll learn quite a bit about how WOM really works. In the meantime, I thought I'd share a few misconceptions.

### Word-of-Mouth Myths

**Negative WOM is bad:** You've probably heard that consumers share negative opinions 11 times more often than positive ones, but I'm not going to focus on frequency (incidentally, this metric came from a 1970s study that was later invalidated, but the story was sexy enough to stick). In fact, negative WOM is just as necessary -- and just as valuable -- as positive WOM. We share opinions to help each other decide what to buy, and it's the negative stuff -- the truths about what we get when we try a product -- that we need to hear.

But one of the most surprising byproducts of negative WOM is the emergence of brand defenders, or "Quiet Advocates." It turns out that when negative WOM gets really bad, a group of individuals organically develops and creates the most powerful positive WOM in the world: real consumers voluntarily defending a brand. Think of these as a group of massive 350-pound offensive linemen protecting your quarterback: They keep you from getting sacked.

**WOM is created by special people:** You've likely heard the terms influential, connector, hub. It's been said that this minority drives the opinions of the majority. Not true. My research shows that everyday people spread just as much information and have just as much influence as those special sorts. In the online world, they share as many ideas, read as many blogs, search for as many products, and write and read reviews just as much as everyone else. As a matter of fact, we've found that everyday advocates are actually more effective than many highly touted "connectors"

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at sharing their ideas in a way that generates results.

**WOM happens online:** Wait, wait, wait! Don't get all upset. I'm not saying that online media isn't valid, or that it doesn't have value. It's just that the most meaningful exchanges generally occur offline. OK, more than generally. We've found that 80 percent of every WOM interaction takes place face-to-face.

So where do online marketing professionals fit in? There is good news: 40 percent of every WOM interaction includes a reference to another form of media -- and not just the obvious (TV, radio, print). Web searches, online reviews, even banner ads are all discussed in everyday WOM exchanges. Keep creating media: It gives people substance to talk about.

The key for online marketers is to recognize that online media may be most valuable as a point of reference that aids natural WOM -- a conversation starter, and, you hope, a destination at the end of the conversation, too. The struggle, of course, is in convincing your clients of this value. Unfortunately, there's no way to get paid for the numbers of times an online message is mentioned in a face-to-face conversation. You'd all be rich if you did.

Dave Balter is the founder and CEO, BzzAgent, Inc. His first book, *Grapevine: The New Art of Word-of-Mouth Marketing*, will be released this month.

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