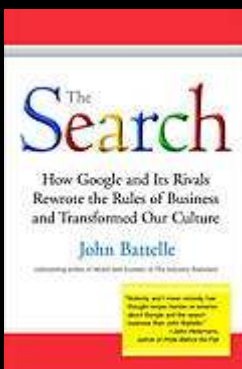


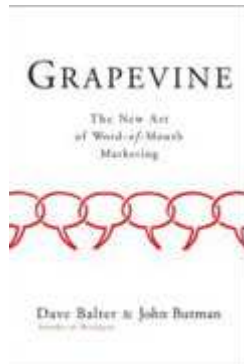
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Business Books



[Grapevine: The New Art of Word-of-Mouth Marketing](#) by Dave Balter & John Butman (Portfolio Books)

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In our cluttered and fragmented media landscape, viral marketing has achieved unprecedented importance as well as respectability as a viable technique. Make that techniques in the plural, because viral has itself fragmented to cover numerous different disciplines, from email and search marketing to celebrity endorsement and promotional giveaways. But the core technique is usually the same. Make some sort of cool or funny or sexy ad or website or event, and then simply hope it's cool or funny or sexy enough to get people talking about it round the watercooler. But there's no guarantee that the buzz will ever actually get started, and it's harder still to measure the results. Dave Balter's BzzAgent is among the more innovative and imaginative of the numerous agencies set up to mine this particular vein. Grapevine, co-written with Jon Butman, sets out his stall, providing a persuasive argument for why his special brand of word-of-mouth marketing works.

With BzzAgent, Balter set out to try and manage that trickle-down more effectively by creating his own social network which could be specifically manipulated to maximise word-of-mouth value. Of course the internet has long served as a core platform for viral marketing, primarily as a conduit which encourages consumers to swap links to "cool sites" or video clips. Balter has come up with a new spin, adapting the concept of an online community to become the engine room for a sort of marketing club.

BzzAgent coordinates an online forum where ordinary consumers sign up to become unpaid - yes, unpaid - part-time marketing executives. They can then sign up to any one of BzzAgent's various current campaigns - clients include Penguin Books, Lee Jeans, Bacardi, Ralph Lauren and Castrol oil - and are sent an information pack, complete with product samples. The agency suggests ways of spreading the word about any particular client, but above all asks agents to be honest and opinionated about the product. That's because negative word-of-mouth can sometimes work almost as effectively as positive, while also providing immensely valuable feedback to manufacturers. (And as Oscar Wilde, who knew more

than his fair share about negative word-of-mouth, said "There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."). Each time agents promote the target, they file a report online about who, what, when and how they Bzz'ed. The BzzAgent team evaluate that Bzz and award points to that agent which can be redeemed later for a reward. Simple, no? Effective, yes!

Key to BzzAgent's philosophy is the belief that word-of-mouth marketing works best when it's delivered by ordinary people. Underpinning it is the understanding that most ordinary people also love freebies, and like to feel important. But above all, no sales tool works as effectively as an honest and opinionated personal recommendation from a friend. In another neat spin, Balter has also used his agents to give extra oomph to the sales campaign for his own book. A few days after publication he let slip in his onsite blog to field agents that no one had yet posted a customer review of the book on Amazon. With a few hours Amazon was inundated and had to cut off the number of online reviews at 40, around four times more than any other book on the same subject...

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