

RECIPE FOR SUCCESSFUL BUZZ

Not every marketable product or service lends itself to buzz marketing. Based on a reading of various writings and after pondering past case histories, we suggest the following ingredients of a successful buzz campaign:

- 1. Unique product or message** First and foremost, the product has to be unique and interesting enough to become the topic of social conversations. When someone sees the product, it should arouse curiosity so the consumer looks at the product closely and finds and learns something about it worth telling others. And what he or she learns should be interesting enough so that he or she is eager to talk. Uniqueness of the product was a favorable factor both for the Vespa and the PT Cruiser, and, of course, recently for the Wii and Equmen.
- 2. Inherent human interest story** Beyond uniqueness, what helps tremendously is that the product or topic be of inherent human interest (beyond its utilitarian value). Celebrity gossip spreads like a buzz because people find celebrities an interesting part of their world. It is doubtful that one could create a buzz around commodity products, which are used to do mere chores. Thus, Rumba, the new robotic vacuum cleaner, is less likely to get any buzz; but a product like bow-lingual (a gizmo, available from Sharper Image, that translates “woof” and a dog’s emotions, into words) will, well, buzz!

It is the marketers’ creative challenge to find ways of building human-interest stories in otherwise mundane products. Cigarettes themselves are a commodity product, at least for non-smokers. But makers of Lucky Strike undertook an innovative public relations campaign few years ago. It hired young people to roam the streets in major cities; they would offer you a beach chair to sit on and a cup of hot coffee to sip if you were forced out of “no smoking” buildings while you wanted to take a puff—and you could be smoking any brand. The gesture is, at least in appearance, so humane and touching that even anti-smoking crusaders would chuckle about it.

- 3. Scarcity and Mystery** The product should not be in abundant supply. One that is easily available or easily seen will kill a buzz even before it begins. Of course, large-scale mass awareness is its ultimate goal, but in the initial stages of the buzz, the product should be rare, and the story about it should be known only to a select few. Thus, a mass advertising campaign and a buzz could never coexist. The topic information should look like “secret knowledge.” Buzz makers want to feel and look like they have an inside scoop, that they are “in the know,” and they are doing you a favor by letting you know. In turn, then, you feel privileged to become the new “in the know.” And of course you can’t wait to show off your being “in the know,” so you carefully tell a “chosen few” others about it. This “mystery chatter” is the *modus operandi* of buzz.

- 4. Authenticity** The buzz topic has to be authentic. A buzz maker can’t sing rave praise about a product that turns out to lack any umph. In this respect at least, buzz is like all advertising: a false product performance claim kills a product; a false claim that is mass advertised kills it faster. The author of a book titled *Purple Cow* packaged the book in a milk carton and sent it to a select few (yours truly included), but this would have been all in vain if the book’s contents had not vividly demonstrated the success stories of marketing programs that stood out by being truly different, just as the purple cow does from the herd of white and black and brown cows.

- 5. Free Agent** The buzz-bees should be free agents, not hired hands. Before the movie *Titanic* was released, a glowing review of it appeared on a Web site called www.aint-it-cool-news.com; the Website was run by an Austin, Texas based geeky guy named Harry Jay Knowles, who published the site to disseminate the inside scoop on Hollywood happenings. The thing about Knowles was that he was no hired hand; instead he published stories the movie moguls tried hard to keep hush hush. That pre-release review is credited in part for the skyrocketing success of *Titanic*. Thus, buzz depends on the apparent impartiality of the talker.

- 6. Non-commercialism** Finally, and related to the principle of Free Agent, the buzz should have the appearance of a social phenomenon rather than commercial advertising. When Lee Jeans Co. emailed its video clips, the recipients could play the video clips without knowing the sponsor’s identity; only after a few months did the company reveal that to play the fuller version of the game, the consumer had to get a code from the label of the Lee Jeans in the stores—by which time the company had already created a following among teenagers who found the video clips rather fun (though silly).

These six ingredients are not absolute requirements, individually, but they are highly desirable. If a campaign lacks any one or more of these ingredients, it would be harder to sustain the buzz. And if one of these ingredients is missing or weak, other ingredients have to work that much harder. For example, the more transparent the commercial aspect, the stronger the other drivers of buzz, such as uniqueness, human-interest, scarcity, etc., would have to be. Vespa’s commercialism was apparent, but the product and the ‘visual personality’ of the riders were attractive.

Further reading: Seth Godin and Malcolm Gladwell, *Unleashing the Ideavirus* (Hyperion 2001); Gerry Khermouch and Jeff Green, “Buzz Marketing,” *Business Week*, July 30, 2001, p. 50-56; Nancy K. Austin, “Buzz: In Search of the Most Elusive Force in All of Marketing,” *Inc. Magazine*, May 1998, 44-50; Emanuel Rosen, *The Anatomy of Buzz: How to Create Word of Mouth Marketing* (Currency 2002).