

## THE YEAR AHEAD MARKET RESEARCH



# Ten word of mouth brand resolutions for the New Year

Research shows that word of mouth is present at a similar level to traditional advertising, and is usually positive. Digital media provide fertile opportunities for brands to spread their messages to a wide audience. TNS's Sue Burden suggests how brands can make WOM work for them



### Chinese whispers:

Although the majority of word of mouth is face to face, digital channels, such as websites, email and SMS, also provide lots of opportunities

There's nothing new about word of mouth (WOM). From Eve telling Adam about a delicious new fruit in the Garden of Eden, WOM has been a credible and convincing channel of communication. What makes it so important for brands now is firstly the diminishing power of traditional media channels and, secondly, the potential for spreading positive WOM via the growing digital channels.

WOM offers considerable clout as a channel of digital communication for brands. At TNS, in 2008, we put questions about WOM on nine tracking studies as an experiment, and found that not only was WOM often present at a similar level to advertising in mainstream media like TV, it was also primarily positive – an effective brand communications medium, with relatively low costs. An opportunity not to be missed.

Although the TNS study found that the majority of WOM about brands is still face to face, digital media – websites, email, SMS – represent a fertile opportunity for brands. These channels can amplify a message to a wide audience and allow the brand to initiate more positive WOM messages. Generating positive WOM for your brand takes commitment, effort and resources. Here are a few ideas for a brand looking to make WOM happen:

**1. Convince brand stakeholders** that WOM will be a profitable strategy for your brand. Les Binet and Peter Field's recent book, "Marketing in an era of accountability" analysed 880 IPA ad effectiveness case studies and saw that campaigns that were focused on achieving high "talkability" were more likely to achieve high profitability.

**2. Add the "WOM-factor"** to your creative briefs for any brand communications. At the recent WOM Marketing Conference, Publicis planning director John Woodward recommended that clients change their evaluation criteria for new creative work from "What does it communicate?" and "Do I like it?" to "What will people say about it after they've seen it?" and "Would I want to share it?"

**3. What are consumers saying?** Find out what your consumers are already saying about your brand. Look online where your consumers surf. What's influencing them? Do this yourself or ask a research company to do it for you. This

way you can stimulate and facilitate the conversation that's already happening.

**4. Brand definition:** Let the people who buy your brand define your brand. Coca-Cola global vice president of interactive marketing Carol Kruseat says: "Consumers own our brands." Follow this approach with your WOM strategy. Base it on in-depth insights about every aspect of your consumers' interaction with the brand.

**5. Make your website WOM-friendly:** Create content that consumers will engage with, that they would like to respond to and pass on to their friends. This could include: material that is consumer friendly, fun and constantly updated; a channel for two-way communication with the brand; the opportunity for feedback from other consumers so they can feel part of a community; a brand image that is open, welcoming and responsive.

**6. Commit internal resources** to WOM. This may come from budgets and people who would previously have been focused on managing traditional media activities.

**7. Activate WOM:** Define your brand's community (for example, who is interacting with it online?); define stories your brand can tell (WOM/ad agencies can help with this).

**8. Be prepared to make rapid changes** as your WOM campaign progresses. Successful WOM does not involve months of preparation before sitting back and watching it happen. Change the paradigm from firstly "learn" and secondly "do", to firstly "do" and secondly "learn".

**9. Respond to contact from consumers:** Consumers are positively impressed (and generate more WOM) when a brand replies to a comment they made online.

**10. Tracking:** Include a measure of WOM on your tracking, as we did in our study. We find this very useful for clients and it will show what WOM can do for your brand. ●

*Sue Burden is head of brand & communications research, TNS UK*