

FROM THE GUEST EDITOR: SPECIAL ISSUE ON ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH ADVERTISING, MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION

Steve Edwards

Welcome readers to this special issue on electronic word-of-mouth. I have heard from many of you that this is the best issue of JIAD to ever exist! (NOTE: rumor generation)

Word-of mouth is fascinating to examine as it is so powerful, so complex, and so hard to influence. Yet, positive word of mouth is the Holy Grail for companies looking to sway consumers. People trust their families and friends. People even trust disinterested strangers. Companies can start word-of-mouth, but the problem is that once it is unleashed, there is little control the content.

Advertisers have tried to influence word-of-mouth for decades.

Remember the television commercial for E.F. Hutton? In a noisy restaurant one guy says to another guy, "My broker is E.F. Hutton, and E.F. Hutton says ... " and the whole crowd falls silent, listening. The tag line: "When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen."

Others have followed similar strategies imparting opportunities for virtual word-of-mouth by depicting a third person overhearing a conversation.

A television commercial begins with "Joe" welcoming his financial advisor "Bob" on to his yacht, while "Scott" is on the dock readying his supplies. Bob starts telling Joe about the great strategy he has developed for investing his nest egg. Joe invites Bob into the cabin of the boat to discuss the details. Scott is still on the dock, but moves closer to the boat trying to hear the conversation. The tag line, "There are better ways to develop an investment strategy...Advisors available by appointment."

Still other companies have made fun of word-of-mouth in their advertisements.

A couple sitting at a diner is talking about a rumor they overheard about a company and how its stock price will grow. Another man who was in the booth behind them listening to the conversation immediately goes and buys stock in the company. The conversation between the couple ends, "if only

my uncle Fred hadn't dreamed the whole thing." The tag line, "Who are you listening to?"

While word-of-mouth is powerful, how does electronic word-of-mouth change the dynamic? In one aspect, taking opinion online lessens its impact. It is no longer personal. It is no longer immediate. It is no longer disinterested. In another aspect, taking opinion online is more powerful. Its reach is significant. It may be more credible in print. It is accessed by people who are interested/receptive. It can occur closer to the purchase decision.

In this issue we have seven interesting articles exploring these topics to varying degrees. The authors look at individuals' online opinion seeking behavior, how they come to believe in word-of-mouth, how people use discussion boards, and how online word-of-mouth serves as parasocial interaction. Another article investigates the effectiveness of viral campaigns in comparison with traditional television advertising. Finally, there are two articles examining the structure of networks used by consumers to share opinions.

I hope these articles will serve as a place to begin the exploration of electronic word-of-mouth. Given the complexity of the topic and the dynamic environment in which it occurs, we must keep examining the ever changing methods that consumers employ to share product and company information. Discussion boards, product review sites, individual and collective blogs, and the growth of video blogs all impact the environment in which word-of-mouth is occurring and changes the way information is shared. Such information changes consumer information seeking behavior and impacts purchase decisions.

It is our job to study these issues and develop an understanding of how such information sharing changes online. For better or worse, it is becoming easier to share opinions. Advertisers must be part of the exchange of information or they may end up victims of the process.

In closing, I am asking for your help to make this issue a success. If each of you who read this could forward the link to

two others, and they forward the link to two others, we will have over 1,000,000 readers in only 20 iterations! Believe in the power of word-of-mouth and spread the word...

ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR

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