



What's the buzz about?

Marketers are hoping to harness word of mouth for high-impact advertising campaigns

Hey, I tried this brand new product on the weekend and I just had to tell someone. I used it in this recipe and everyone loved it. It was so different and you won't believe how easy it was. You have to try it!

That's me doing what marketers hope most consumers will do – “buzz” or talk about a new product they've tried with their family, friends and co-workers. In fact, most consumers already do just that. But specifically incorporating word of mouth into an advertising campaign is a fairly new concept.

Toronto-based Unilever Canada Inc. is venturing into buzz marketing this month for its Hellmann's mayonnaise brand. The company enlisted the services of Boston-based BzzAgent Inc., which offers food manufacturers access to its network of consumers, or “agents,” who volunteer to try new products and then decide whether or not to talk about them with family, friends and colleagues – anyone they'd normally speak to about these things.

In the case of Hellmann's mayonnaise, Unilever's Shannon Tyler, assistant brand building manager on Hellmann's, says the product lent itself perfectly to buzz marketing. For one thing, research tells Unilever that its consumers already do talk about food. “We know for a fact that the target audience for Hellmann's really likes to entertain, experiment and make new recipes, and are surrounded by a circle of those same kinds of people,” says Tyler.

Established in 2002, BzzAgent works like this. BzzAgent doesn't recruit anyone; consumers join “organically,” says Joe Chernov, the company's director of Public Relations, with about 4,000 consumers signing up each week through its website. Once they join the network, consumers enter information about themselves and participate in different polls so “we can see what they're interested in and what they're lifestyles are like,” says Chernov. When a campaign comes up that suits their profiles, they're invited by e-mail to join (the minimum number of agents per campaign is 1,000). At that point they can decline or accept. If they



accept, they're sent either a product sample or, if it doesn't travel well, a coupon to redeem free samples. They're also provided with a BzzGuide, which includes information about the product and what makes it “buzz worthy.” It also includes a chapter on Bzz activities. For example, one of the activities for agents during a campaign for new cream cheeses included bringing bagels and samples of the cream cheese to work for colleagues to try. All activities are optional.

For the Hellmann's campaign, which is called “Be Famous for Your Food,” Unilever has 1,900 Canadian agents

signed up. Each will receive two 950-mL jars of Hellmann's, the Real Mayonnaise and the Half the Fat Mayonnaise. Each agent will also receive 11 recipe booklets that contain nine recipes and two 75-cent-off coupons per booklet. The idea is that they'll keep one booklet and give the rest away. (The campaign also has other advertising elements, including television, print, Internet, in store activities, on-pack promotions and potential partnerships.)

What makes this kind of marketing approach unique is that it allows the consumer to participate in the advertising, says Chernov. “Consumers see upwards of 3,000 advertising impressions per day and it's probably higher in a major city,” he says. “We learn to filter most of those out. So this is certainly a way that brands can sidestep that filtering that happens when marketing is an affront to a consumer.”

And there's more. Other experts say it's the novelty of this approach that makes it so appealing – the “cool” factor of being able to try the new product first. And even more importantly, consumers who hear about the products through the agents are receiving honest opinions from people they trust. As Tyler says: “Research shows that consumers view word of mouth as a very credible source of brand information. When you hear it from your best friends you're more apt to believe it over what you hear in another marketing vehicle.”

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