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*“... effective WOM and buzz marketing is not rooted in the marketing of a particular brand, product, or service, but rather is based in the everyday relationships and conversations of people discussing other matters.”*

## **WHAT'S ALL THE BUZZ ABOUT?**

Everyday Communication and the  
Relational Basis of Word-of-Mouth  
and Buzz Marketing Practices

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*Although the influential role of word-of-mouth communication has been known for decades, a more recent phenomenon is the emergence of explicit organizational efforts to stimulate "buzz" (contagious talk about a brand, service, product, or idea). Buzz marketing organizations either pay people, or seek volunteers, to try new brands and then have agents "talk them up" among their social networks. This article contends that the practice of buzz marketing is usefully framed within the study of everyday communication, which has shown considerable growth in the field of communication studies over the past decade. This framework provides a reliable scientific source and basis on which to base further claims about the effectiveness and ethics of buzz marketing.*

**Keywords:** *word-of-mouth communication; buzz marketing; social consequences of interpersonal influence model; everyday talk/institutional interaction; ethics*

The study of personal influence and the idea that there are certain people who are especially influential over others has fascinated researchers, practitioners, and the general public for more than 60 years. Various names in academic and popular circles, these people have been called *opinion leaders* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), *early adopters* (Rogers, 1962/2003), *influentials* (Weimann, 1994), and *Influential Americans*® (Keller & Berry, 2003), while the process of personal influence has been linked to, or synonymous with, various phenomena such as compliance gaining (strategic attempts to seek compliance from others in interpersonal settings; Wilson, 2002), the diffusion of innovations (how ideas spread in a culture; Rogers, 1962/2003), buzz (contagious word-of-mouth commentary about products, services, brands, and ideas; Walker, 2004), and tipping points (the point at which an idea, behavior, or product "tips," crossing a threshold from being a minor phenomenon to a wild epidemic; Gladwell, 2000).

Numerous organizations, for-profit and not-for-profit, in an assortment of industries (consumer products, fashion, health care, law, higher education, etc.) have sought to capitalize on a renewed awareness and interest in the influential role that informal conversation and relational networks play internally to an organization (e.g., in terms of sharing knowledge within and across organizational units; Cross & Parker, 2004; May & Zorn, 2002) and especially to external audiences (e.g., in the case of viral and buzz marketing). Thus, although the power of stimulating word-of-mouth and relational networks has been known for some time (Arndt,

1967; Whyte, 1954), a more recent phenomenon is when certain firms seek to consciously engineer buzz in relational networks (Balter & Butman, 2005; Dye, 2000; Godin, 2001; Ozcan, 2004; Rosen, 2000; Walker, 2004). For example, some firms (such as Big Fat Inc.) pay people to go out and talk up a brand, either in face-to-face or online settings, where the fact that they are employed by a marketing agency is not disclosed (a form of “undercover” marketing). Other firms (such as BzzAgent, Inc.) actively recruit volunteers who willingly participate in a campaign by going out and buzzing the product or service (oftentimes in exchange for points that can be redeemed for prizes or the knowledge that they are the first among their peers to have access to a new product) and then report back to the buzz marketing company their own and others’ feedback about the product (the company then compiles and analyzes these various reports from the field and presents them to the client). Still others (e.g., Proctor & Gamble’s Tremor program) form an extensive network of carefully selected teenagers to create buzz among peers for their clients’ brands and products (Wells, 2004).

These distinct kinds of organizational marketing practices have raised a number of ethical concerns, some more than others. In addition to whether or not the institutional identity of the agent is disclosed, whether or not the person buzzing the brand is doing so for some form of compensation, and whether or not agents involve minors younger than age 13 (Wells, 2004), a significant concern is that through buzz marketing marketers are better able to infiltrate everyday conversations and relationships (Walker, 2004), which might be regarded as further instantiation of corporate colonization of the life world (Deetz, 1992). With traditional forms of marketing and advertising efforts, consumer audiences can “tune out” or “turn off” the advertising. However, what happens when the marketing is your friend or family member, in online and offline conversations? Is society increasingly falling prey to the “commercialization of chit-chat?” (Walker, 2004). Although these concerns are not new—for example, marketing to known others has been well-documented and critiqued in terms of Tupperware parties (Frenzen & Davis, 1990; Taylor, 1978) and multilevel marketing companies (Biggart, 1989; Carl, 2004; Fitzpatrick & Reynolds, 1997)—the fact that increasing numbers of well-known, mainstream organizations seek

to amplify buzz in social networks has elevated the concern (Vranica, 2005). In part to address these ethical concerns, a new trade association has been created—the Word of Mouth Marketing Association ([www.womma.org](http://www.womma.org)).

The purpose of this article is to report findings from a study of how buzz marketers engage in word-of-mouth communication as part of their everyday conversational and relationship practices. By drawing on the considerable body of research that has grown throughout the past two decades showing the importance of everyday, routine interaction (Leatham & Duck, 1990; Wood & Duck, 2006), this article seeks to provide a descriptive foundation on which further claims about the effectiveness and ethics of buzz marketing can be based. Specifically, the current study seeks answers to questions of frequency of word of mouth (e.g., of the total number of interactions a person has, how many included word of mouth about an organization, brand, product, or service), what medium (such as face-to-face, phone, or online) was most commonly used, how commonly a recommendation or referral was part of the interaction, the conversational context surrounding a buzz episode, and what percentage of all buzz marketing agents' word-of-mouth communication is part of a buzz marketing campaign.

### **WORD OF MOUTH IN THE INTERNET AND BUZZ MARKETING ERA**

Defining *word of mouth* (WOM) can be tricky, especially in light of the Internet and recent emergence of buzz marketing firms. According to Buttle's (1998) review of marketing research, Arndt (1967) discussed WOM as face-to-face communication about a brand, product, or service between people who are perceived as not having connections to a commercial entity. Bone's (1992) definition is similar though she noted that WOM could be a group phenomenon: "an exchange of comments, thoughts, and ideas among two or more individuals in which none of the individuals represent a marketing source" (p. 579). Stern (1994) distinguished *WOM* from *advertising* in that *WOM* is face-to-face, interactive, ephemeral, spontaneous, and does not include such features as clever

turns of phrases or jingles. Buttle (1998), however, found these definitions unsatisfactory because (a) WOM can include talk about an organization (in addition to a brand, product, or service), (b) it can be electronically mediated (such as cell phone, chat rooms, e-mail, Web sites, "tell-a-friend" hyperlinks, etc.), and (c) more and more companies may offer incentives or rewards for consumers to spread WOM or make referrals (e.g., to refer friends and family members for a company's services). Buttle concluded that currently the only distinguishing feature of WOM may be that "WOM is uttered by sources who are assumed by receivers to be independent of corporate influence" (p. 243).

In the case of buzz marketing, however, even this aspect of corporate influence fades away because buzz marketing agents are either paid by, or voluntarily affiliate with, a buzz marketing firm. Thus, their institutional affiliation opens them up to the perception by others of corporate influence. For the purposes of this article, I distinguish between "institutional" and "everyday" WOM. *Everyday WOM* (or just *WOM*) is defined as informal, evaluative communication (positive or negative) between at least two conversational participants about characteristics of an organization and/or a brand, product, or service that could take place online or offline (see Buttle, 1998; Tax, Murali, & Christiansen, 1993). The phrase *institutional WOM* or *buzz* is used to refer to WOM communication where the institutional identity or corporate affiliation of at least one participant may be salient and/or where the object being discussed (i.e., an organization, brand, product, or service) is part of an organized WOM campaign. This difference parallels the distinction that language and social interaction scholars make between "everyday" and "institutional" interaction with the exception that there are no claims made about which of the two is foundational or parasitic on the other (see Drew & Heritage, 1992).

### EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONAL BASIS OF BUZZ

The current study was conceptually informed by, and theoretically situated within, a relational network-based theory of interper-

sonal influence: Carl & Duck's (2004) social consequences of interpersonal influence (SCIPI) model. For more than a decade, communication scholars have recognized the importance of the everyday and routine aspects of communication (Duck, 1990; Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc, 1991; Dainton, 2000; Dindia, 2000; Leatham & Duck, 1990; Wood & Duck, 2006). Furthermore, these scholars contend that dyadic and network relationships provide a framework in which to understand the process of interpersonal influence (Carl & Duck, 2004; Dillard & Fitzpatrick, 1985; Oriña, Wood, & Simpson, 2002). The SCIPI model holds that everyday communication routines create and sustain relationships and lead to their deterioration. Social and personal relationships are not simply containers for communication but are pervasively rhetorical in that they subtly influence how people make sense of their worlds, their place in it, and the rightness of their worldviews (Duck & Pond, 1989). Carl and Duck (2004) claimed that although communication routines are important and powerful, they are often overlooked and underappreciated as explanatory mechanisms for a range of phenomena of interest to communication scholars. Applied to the topic of this article, then, their model suggests that to gain a rich understanding of how WOM communication works, it must be understood in terms of everyday communication practices and how relationships serve as a basis for interpersonal influence.

Existing research on WOM, however, has not situated the practice within the context of everyday communication and relationships. Although some work investigates WOM in the context of social networks (e.g., Brown & Reingen, 1987) their focus tends to be on the structural position within the network, and not the underlying communication and relationship dynamics. Furthermore, a majority of the WOM literature, especially from a marketing perspective, tends to focus on the antecedents, moderators, and consequences of WOM (Buttle, 1998; Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003; Mangold, Miller, & Brockway, 1999) and the frequency and valence of WOM (positive, neutral, or negative; Bone, 1992; Dichter, 1966; Richins, 1983; Spangenberg & Giese, 1997; Swan & Oliver, 1989). Although much of this frequency research concerns how many people a person told, usually after a satisfied or dissatisfied experience with an organization, brand, product, or service (e.g., Richins, 1983), other research on frequency has looked

for special groups of people who engage in more WOM than others. For example, Higie, Feick, and Price (1987) found that “market mavens”—consumers who possess general expertise about the marketplace (rather than a specific product category) and have special characteristics for diffusing shopping-related information to others—spread more WOM than other consumers. Keller and Berry (2005) reported that people who are socially and politically active in their local communities, known as Influential Americans® or *influentials*, are twice as likely to recommend products and services and to be sought out for their recommendations, than the general public. Such findings have led some marketers to identify and focus their marketing efforts on these seemingly “magic” people (Walker, 2004). However, insights from studies on routine relational interaction suggest that what makes these people magic or influential is that they are already part of relational networks wherein others have determined their opinions and experiences are worth listening to based on prior conversations, usually from talk based on other matters (see Leatham & Duck, 1990, for a parallel point about how the basis for social support is laid during conversations not directly related to social support). Thus, it may not be that individuals are influential but rather that the process of WOM communication is influential because of its basis in the everyday, routine talk of relational networks.

In contrast to traditional WOM marketing research, research on buzz marketing is still in its infancy. Verlegh, Verkerk, Tuk, and Smidts (2004) mentioned, but did not study, buzz marketers in their experimental research on whether or not financial incentives used when stimulating customer referrals alter the meaning of the situation such that consumers would perceive the WOM episode to be “persuasive” rather than just friendly, peer advice. Thomas (2004) represented an early conceptual piece on *buzz marketing* where it was defined as the “amplification of initial marketing efforts by third parties through their passive or active influence” (p. 64). An early empirical study that applied insights from existing WOM and social network research from a firm’s perspective was conducted by Godes and Mayzlin (2004). The focus of their field-based quasi-experimental study was on whether and how a company could successfully market its products through an amplified WOM campaign by selectively targeting a group of key influencers. They



found that nonloyal, rather than loyal, customers had the biggest incremental or marginal impact on sales (i.e., beyond the impact that may have already been created). Furthermore, their results showed that, consistent with the theory of “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973), acquaintances (rather than friends or relatives) had the biggest marginal impact on sales. Their explanation was loyal customers were already likely to have affected their close friends and family (strong ties in their social networks), and thus if a company wants to start a new buzz campaign, a company should target nonloyal, or at least less loyal, customers and have them spread the word to their acquaintances. Furthermore, acquaintances are important because, although they are a part of one’s social network, they are peripheral and thus more central in another social network that has yet to be tapped.

To contribute to the emerging academic research on buzz marketing from a communication and relational perspective, then, the current study posed the following research questions (for brevity, *WOM* in the questions below refers to everyday and institutional *WOM*):

*Research Question 1:* How frequently do buzz marketing agents engage in *WOM* as a function of their total interactions?

*Research Question 2:* Does the frequency of interactions, *WOM* episodes, and episode to interaction ratio vary by type of relationship (specifically, whether the conversational partner is a stranger, acquaintance, friend, best friend, romantic partner or spouse, relative, or coworker) and/or by day of the week (i.e., Sunday through Saturday)?

*Research Question 3:* What percentage of buzz marketing agents’ *WOM* is part of a buzz marketing campaign?

*Research Question 4:* What was the most frequently reported medium (e.g., face-to-face vs. online) for buzz marketing?

*Research Question 5:* How common are recommendations and referrals in buzz marketing episodes?

*Research Question 6:* What percentage of buzz marketing talk is positive, negative, or neutral in terms of valence?

*Research Question 7:* What percentage of buzz marketing agents’ *WOM* interactions is planned versus spontaneous?

*Research Question 8:* What topics of conversation surround *WOM* episodes by buzz marketing agents?

*Research Question 9:* What locations were most frequently reported for *WOM* episodes?

*Research Question 10:* What activities were most frequently reported during WOM episodes?

## METHOD

### RESEARCH SITE

In December 2004, the principal investigator made arrangements to collaborate with a buzz marketing firm in the northeast region of the United States. At the time of data collection, this particular firm (“agency”) had more than 70,000 volunteers serving as buzz marketing agents (“agents”). A typical campaign involves a client making contact with the agency to build buzz about a product. The client and agency collaborate on a guide book that explains the facts and interesting information about the product to be “buzzed” and ways to bring up the product in conversation (though no conversations are scripted and the agents are encouraged to come up with their own ways of talking about the product). Through the agency’s Web site, the campaign is released to a particular set of agents (either based on demographic variables, past campaign performance, or answers to specific polling questions), and agents can elect whether or not to participate in the campaign. The campaign is limited to a certain number of agents who can participate, determined by the client and agency. Those agents who sign up to participate receive a free sample of the product and an accompanying guidebook. Their instructions are to use the product and then share their honest opinions (positive or negative) with others in their social network. Agents are encouraged to disclose their identities as buzz marketing agents based on an honor system. After an agent buzzes the product (“episode”), the agent logs into the company’s Web site to file a report about the episode and the feedback from the other person. The agent receives an individual response from internal agency staff, and the report is evaluated by the staff member on such criteria as thoroughness and creativity (more points are awarded for creative buzz and thorough reporting of the episode). At the conclusion of the campaign, which could

last a few months, all the reports are collected and analyzed into a final report and presented to the client company.

## INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES

Two Web-based surveys were used to collect data about buzz marketing agents' WOM communication practices.

*Total Interactions and Word-of-Mouth Episodes (TIWOME) Worksheet.* The Total Interactions and Word-of-Mouth Episodes Worksheet was an original survey designed by the principal investigator to get at frequency data about the total number of interactions and WOM episodes a person had for a 7-day period with people of different relationship types (strangers, acquaintances, friends, best friends, romantic partners or spouses, relatives, and coworkers). The worksheet was laid out in a  $7 \times 7$  grid with *Days of the Week* across the top (columns) and *Relationship Types* down the side (rows). An *interaction* was defined as "any talk with another person that you consider meaningful, including 'talk for talk's sake,' asking and/or receiving information, talking at a social gathering, or talk to become better acquainted or to resolve differences. It would not include ritualized exchanges of hi and bye made in passing." A *word-of-mouth episode* was defined as a conversation (or portion of a longer conversation) that includes positive or negative talk about an organization, brand, product, or service. Participants were instructed to record on a paper worksheet the number of interactions rather than the number of people they talked to. For example, if a participant had three distinct interactions with only one friend on Tuesday, they would record three tic marks (not just one) in the appropriate space. If one of those interactions included a WOM episode, they would circle that tic mark. The data from the paper worksheet was entered into a special section of the Agency's Web site by the participant.

*Word-of-Mouth Communication Log.* For three of the WOM episodes, participants were instructed to complete the second survey called the Word-of-Mouth Communication Log (WOMCL) as soon as possible after the episode occurred. Participants were not

constrained in choosing which WOM episode they would report on in more detail. The 44-item WOMCL was adapted by the principal investigator from the Iowa Communication Record (ICR; Duck, 1991). Support for the validity and reliability of the original ICR can be found in Duck et al. (1991). The WOMCL included all of the original ICR items and added questions to determine valence of the talk (positive, negative, or neutral), presence of referral or recommendation, and whether or not the WOM episode they were reporting on was part of an active buzz marketing campaign.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

All agents in the agency (approximately 70,000) were eligible to participate in the current study, and 3,287 electronically indicated their willingness to participate through the agency's Web site. The number of people who agreed to participate represents a small number of the total population, and this may be for two reasons. First, the current study required more than the usual time and energy involved in a campaign, notably monitoring and recording all of their WOM activities during a 7-day period. Second, the current study was announced only on the agency's Web site and agents did not receive any other communication regarding the current study (e.g., the agents could have received a specific e-mail about the study). Thus, agents would have had to be actively browsing the agency's Web site to even learn about the study. These two factors may have introduced a bias into the sample; that is, the sample may have been composed of more highly motivated agents and those who actively check the agency's Web site, the latter implying that they (a) are agents who recently signed up (as agency data suggests those who recently affiliated themselves with the agency more actively monitor the Web site during their first month), and/or (b) were involved with a campaign at the time (and thus would be on the site as part of their participation in that campaign), and/or (c) are more proactive (rather than waiting to be e-mailed by the agency to get involved in agency activities).

If a participant completed the entire study—defined as completing the TIWOME worksheet and three WOMCL surveys—they were eligible to win an Apple iPod. They also received one point

for each worksheet and survey completed that could be redeemed for modest prizes (consistent with existing organizational practices). Data collection ran for 1 week from the end of January to beginning of February 2005. The number of submitted TIWOME worksheets (the 7-day log) was 780, and the number of submitted WOMCL surveys was 2,108. Of these, 501 TIWOME worksheets and 2,088 WOMCL surveys were valid and complete. The participant sample was representative of the larger agent population on all available demographic variables: sex, age, ethnicity, education level, and income levels. 83% of the sample was female; ages ranged from 13 to 72 years with 45% being age 18 to 29 years; approximately 90% self-identified as White or European American; 54% had some college or a 4-year college degree; and approximately 65% reported incomes within the range of U.S. \$20,000 to \$80,000 per year (26% reporting more than \$80,000 and 9% reporting less than \$20,000).

To put the results from the buzz marketing agents in perspective, the TIWOME and WOMCL surveys were administered to a convenience sample of “everyday people” (or “nonagents”). Participants were recruited from communication studies and business classes. Successful completion of all surveys made participants eligible to receive one of two Apple iPod Shuffles through a random drawing. Of 200 eligible students, 30 TIWOME and 75 WOMCL valid and complete Web-based surveys were submitted. Only sex, age, and education level demographic information were collected. Of the sample, 67% was female, and the mean age was 20.3.

## RESULTS

Results reported are compared by “everyday WOM” versus “institutional WOM” and between “buzz marketing agents” and “everyday people.”

**TABLE 1: Frequency Values Between Agents and Nonagents for Episodes, Interactions, and E/I Ratio**

	<i>Agent</i> (n = 83)		<i>Nonagent</i> (N = 30)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Total interactions*	140.9	90.7	108.4	46.5
WOM episodes**	32.1	25.25	16.3	11.5
E/I ratio***	29.4	20.6	13.5	6.3

NOTE: E/I = episode/interaction; WOM = word-of-mouth.

The values were matched by education level (some college) and age (18 to 29 years).

a. Represents the mean average, expressed as a percentage, of number of WOM episodes divided by number of interactions across seven relationship types and 7 days of the week.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

## RESULTS FROM TOTAL INTERACTIONS AND WORD-OF-MOUTH EPISODE WORKSHEET

The first three research questions on frequency of interactions, episodes, and percentage of episodes by interactions were provided by analysis of the TIWOME worksheet (the 7-day log;  $N = 501$ ). Total counts were tallied for the number of interactions and WOM episodes across all seven relationship types and days of the week resulting in a total number of interactions (I) and episodes (E). Similarly, a ratio of episodes to interactions (E/I ratio) was computed for each Relationship type  $\times$  Day of the week. A total E/I ratio was computed by determining the mean average of all 49 (Seven relationship types  $\times$  7 days) individual values. Because of a skewed distribution, outliers for each E, I, and E/I ratio statistic were identified and removed using a box-plot analysis.

*Research Question 1:* How frequently do buzz marketing agents engage in WOM as a function of their total interactions?

The number of interactions for the agent sample ranged from 3 to 388 ( $M = 136.6$ ,  $SD = 84.2$ ), WOM episodes ranged from 0 to 105 ( $M = 28.8$ ,  $SD = 24.1$ ), and E/I ratio ranged from 0 to 82.5% ( $M = 26.4\%$ ,  $SD = 19.4\%$ ). To provide a context for these values and enable comparisons with the nonagent convenience sample ( $N = 30$ ), a subset of the agent sample was created by selecting agents

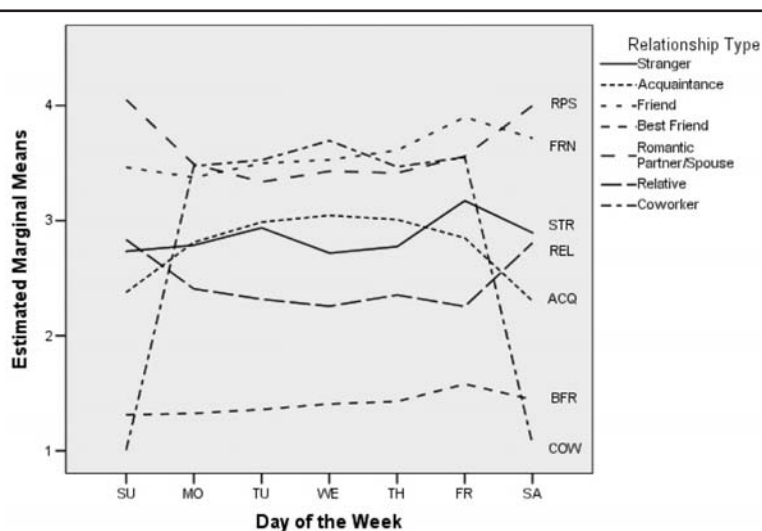


Figure 1: Estimated Marginal Means of Interactions

with “some college” and an age range of 18 to 29 years ( $n = 83$ ). Results are reported in Table 1.

*Research Question 2:* Does the frequency of interactions, WOM episodes, and episode to interaction ratio vary by type of relationship (specifically, whether the conversational partner is a stranger, acquaintance, friend, best friend, romantic partner or spouse, relative, or coworker) and/or by day of the week (i.e., Sunday through Saturday)?

Two general linear model repeated measures tests were used to determine if and/or how the frequency of interactions (see Figure 1) and WOM episodes (see Figure 2) varied by relationship type and/or day of the week, while a mixed models analysis was used to investigate variation for the E/I ratio (see Figure 3). All three analyses used Bonferroni post hoc adjustment to account for multiple comparisons.

*Interactions.* Relationship type was found to be a significant factor for frequency of interactions, Wilks’s lambda = .536,  $F(1, 6) =$

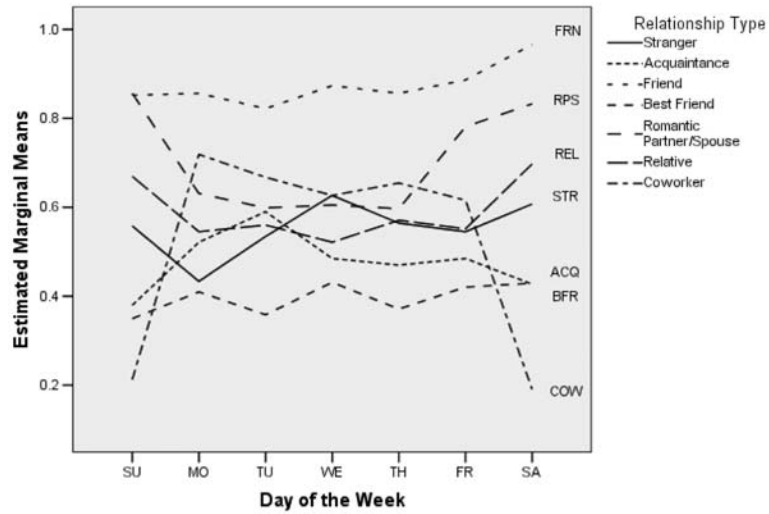


Figure 2: Estimated Marginal Means of Word-of-Mouth Episodes

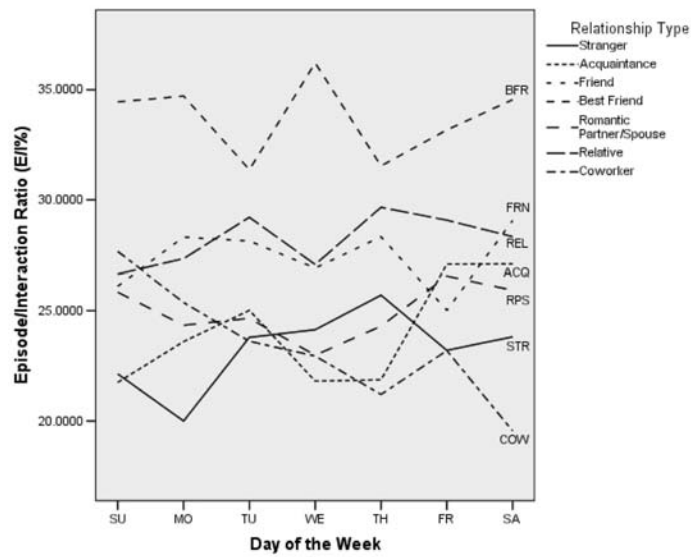


Figure 3: Estimated Marginal Means of Episode-to-Interaction Ratio



66.021,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .464$ . From highest to lowest, estimated marginal means for number of interactions by relationship types were: romantic partner and/or spouse ( $M = 3.611$ ,  $SE = .208$ ), friend ( $M = 3.584$ ,  $SE = .153$ ), stranger ( $M = 2.859$ ,  $SE = .214$ ), coworker ( $M = 2.825$ ,  $SE = .199$ ), acquaintance ( $M = 2.769$ ,  $SE = .172$ ), relative ( $M = 2.461$ ,  $SE = .115$ ), and best friend ( $M = 1.409$ ,  $SE = .090$ ). Compared to all other relationship types, best friends had the lowest average number of interactions ( $p < .001$  for all pairwise comparisons).

Days of the week was also found to be a significant factor for frequency of interactions, Wilks's lambda = .959,  $F(1, 6) = 3.303$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .041$ ). From highest to lowest, estimated marginal means for days of the week were Friday ( $M = 2.980$ ,  $SE = .106$ ), Wednesday ( $M = 2.868$ ,  $SE = .093$ ), Thursday ( $M = 2.865$ ,  $SE = .097$ ), Tuesday ( $M = 2.852$ ,  $SE = .094$ ), Monday ( $M = 2.810$ ,  $SE = .094$ ), Saturday ( $M = 2.603$ ,  $SE = .100$ ), and Sunday ( $M = 2.539$ ,  $SE = .105$ ). In addition, there was a significant interaction effect between relationship types and days of the week, Wilks's lambda = .735,  $F(1, 36) = 4.293$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .265$ ). For example, acquaintances had a lower number of interactions on Saturdays versus Tuesdays ( $-.685$ ,  $SE = .211$ ,  $p = .026$ ).

*WOM episodes.* Relationship type was also found to be a significant factor for number of WOM episodes, Wilks's lambda = .732,  $F(1, 6) = 28.059$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .268$ . From highest to lowest, estimated marginal means for relationship types were friends ( $M = .873$ ,  $SE = .396$ ), romantic partners and/or spouses ( $M = .700$ ,  $SE = .047$ ), relatives ( $M = .588$ ,  $SE = .032$ ), strangers ( $M = .553$ ,  $SE = .048$ ), coworkers ( $M = .527$ ,  $SE = .039$ ), acquaintances ( $M = .480$ ,  $SE = .031$ ), and best friends ( $M = .396$ ,  $SE = .028$ ). Compared to all other relationship types, friends had the highest average number of WOM episodes ( $p < .05$ ), whereas best friends had the lowest number of WOM episodes (significant at  $p < .05$  when compared to friends, romantic partners, and relatives).

There were no significant differences among WOM episodes by day of the week when considered as a single explanatory variable, Wilks's lambda = .990,  $F(1, 6) = .789$ ,  $p = .579$ ,  $\eta^2 = .010$ . There were, however, significant interaction effects of Relationship type  $\times$  Day of the week, Wilks's lambda = .759,  $F(1, 36) = 3.788$ ,  $p <$

.001,  $\eta^2 = .241$ . For example, acquaintances were more likely to engage in WOM episodes on Tuesdays ( $M = .590$ ) rather than Sundays ( $M = .380, p < .05$ ), whereas romantic partners and/or spouses reported the highest number of WOM episodes on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday ( $M = .823$ ), with lower numbers occurring from Monday through Thursday ( $M = .608, p < .05$ ).

*Episode/Interaction ratio.* Using a Type III test of fixed effects to examine E/I ratio, relationship type was also found to be a significant factor,  $F(1, 6) = 28.869, p < .001$ . From highest to lowest, estimated marginal means for relationship types were best friends ( $M = 33.713, SE = 1.104$ ), relatives ( $M = 28.191, SE = 1.037$ ), friends ( $M = 27.413, SE = 1.021$ ), romantic partners and/or spouses ( $M = 24.946, SE = 1.035$ ), acquaintances ( $M = 24.034, SE = 1.056$ ), coworkers ( $M = 23.365, SE = 1.208$ ), and strangers ( $M = 23.257, SE = 1.075$ ). Compared to all other relationship types, best friends had the highest percentage of WOM episodes as a function of their total interactions ( $p < .001$ ).

Similar to WOM episodes, day of the week, on its own, was not a significant factor to explain differences in E/I ratio,  $F(1, 6) = .265, p = .953$ , nor was there a significant interaction effect between Relationship type  $\times$  Day of the week,  $F(1, 36) = 1.127, p = .277$ .

## RESULTS FROM WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION LOG

Research Questions 4 through 8 were answered based on results to the 44-item WOMCL survey ( $N = 2,088$ ). Comparisons are reported with the everyday people convenience sample ( $N = 75$ ), and between agent's "institutional WOM/buzz" and "everyday WOM."

*Research Question 3:* What percentage of buzz marketing agents' WOM is part of a buzz marketing campaign?

Institutional WOM, or buzz that was about an organization, brand, product, or service that was part of a buzz marketing campaign, accounted for 16.3% of the reported WOM episodes,

whereas everyday WOM (i.e., word of mouth that was not tied to a buzz marketing campaign) accounted for 83.7% of the reported WOM episodes. Because these percentages could vary depending on whether or not an agent was actively participating in a campaign at the time of data collection, and the fact that agents could also report the institutional buzz through the agency's reporting process as part of their normal agent activities (thus possibly resulting in a lower number of reported institutional WOM episodes), data was obtained from the agency to determine agents' campaign status (660 of the reported WOM episodes, or 31.6%, involved an agent who was actively participating in a campaign). A post hoc,  $2 \times 2$  cross-tabulation was performed (Active/inactive campaign status  $\times$  Institutional/everyday WOM). Results revealed that a similar pattern held regardless of whether or not the agent was actively involved in a campaign at the time,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,086) = 1.768, p = .184$  (two-tailed). If actively involved in a campaign at the time, the ratio of everyday WOM to institutional WOM was 82.1% to 17.9%, whereas the ratio when not actively involved in a campaign was 84.4% to 15.6%.

*Research Question 4:* What was the most frequently reported medium (e.g., face-to-face vs. online) for buzz marketing?

The most frequently reported medium for a WOM episode was face-to-face (76.9%), followed by phone (16.9%), then instant messaging (3.5%), then e-mail (2.3%), and finally chat room (.4%). Post hoc analysis revealed that this pattern held regardless of age with only minor variations (e.g., 13- to 17-year-olds reported greater use of instant messaging than their peers, whereas agents older than age 50 years reported greater use of the phone than their peers). Among the everyday people sample, the most frequently reported medium was also face-to-face (78.7%), followed by phone (10.7%), then instant messaging (9.3%), and e-mail (1.3%), whereas chat rooms were not reported for WOM episodes.

*Research Question 5:* How common are recommendations and referrals in buzz marketing episodes?

Agents' WOM episodes included a recommendation or referral 71.9% of the time (53.2% by the agent, 18.6% by conversational partner, and 28.1% of the episodes included no recommendations). Of the recommendations made, then, 73.9% were by the agent and 26.0% made by their conversational partner. Results from the everyday people sample show that 58.7% of their WOM episodes included a recommendation or referral (25.3% by the respondent, 33.3% by conversational partner, and 41.3% of the episodes included no recommendations). Of the recommendations made, then, 43.2% were made by the respondent and 56.8% made by his or her conversational partner. When comparing agents' institutional versus everyday WOM, their institutional WOM/buzz included a recommendation 80.6% of the time (71.2% by agent, 9.4% by conversational partner, and 19.4% of the episodes included no recommendations). Thus, for buzz, when a recommendation was present, an agent made the recommendation 88.3% of the time. For everyday WOM, a recommendation was made 70.3% of the time (49.8% by the agent, 20.5% by the conversational partner, and 29.8% of the episodes included no recommendations). Thus, for everyday WOM, when a recommendation was present, an agent made the recommendation 70.8% of the time.

*Research Question 6:* What percentage of buzz marketing talk is positive, negative, or neutral in terms of valence?

The majority (71.7%) of the agent talk for institutional and everyday WOM had a positive valence, whereas 20.6% was neutral, and 7.7% was negative ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = 1.527$ ; scale of  $-3$  to  $+3$  with anchor points of *very negative*, *neutral*, and *very positive*). When segregated by institutional versus everyday WOM, institutional WOM/buzz episodes were slightly more positive ( $M = 1.97$ ,  $SD = 1.259$  vs.  $M = 1.48$ ,  $SD = 1.562$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Agents' everyday WOM was more likely to include neutral and negatively valenced talk (see Figure 4). For the nonagent sample, a majority of their WOM episodes were also positively valenced (76.6%), whereas 9.4% were neutral, and 14.1% were negative ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = 1.833$ ). Thus, agents and nonagents were more likely to report positive WOM, whereas agents were more likely to report neutral

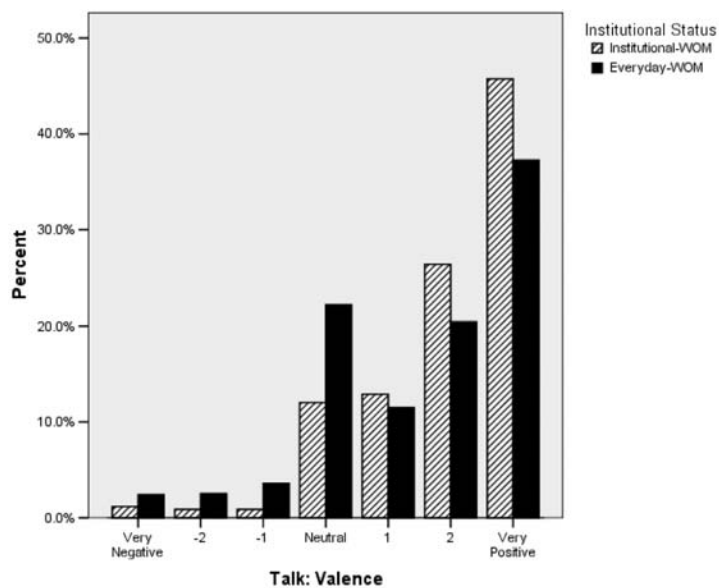


Figure 4: Valence of Episodes for Institutional Versus Everyday Word of Mouth

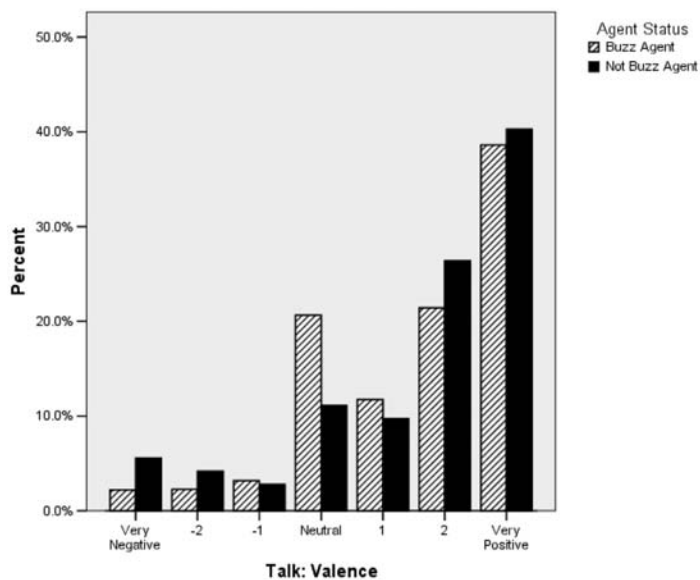


Figure 5: Valence of Episodes for Agents Versus Nonagents

WOM, and nonagents more likely to report negative WOM (see Figure 5).

*Research Question 7:* What percentage of buzz marketing agents' WOM interactions is planned versus spontaneous?

The majority of agents' interactions in which the WOM episode occurred were spontaneous, with 24.2% of the interactions planned. There was no statistically significant difference between the percentage of institutional versus everyday WOM that was planned (27.4% vs. 24.4%, respectively),  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,084) = 1.356$ ,  $p = .244$  (two-tailed). For nonagents, 17.3% of their interactions were planned; however, compared to agents' WOM, this difference was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,160) = 2.203$ ,  $p = .138$  (two-tailed).

*Research Question 8:* What topics of conversation surround WOM episodes by buzz marketing agents?

Agents were asked to describe the main topic of the interaction that included the WOM episode. Their open-ended responses to this question were inductively coded using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Fifteen primary categories, each with multiple subcategories, emerged from the analysis (see Table 2). In coding the data, it became useful to draw a distinction between "talk about Topic X" and whether or not the main purpose of the talk involved a "purchase decision" (i.e., "talk about whether or not to buy or use Topic X"). For example, talk about travel and vacations was coded in the travel category, while talk that involved what airline to fly or Web site to use to purchase an airline ticket was coded as buying and/or using service: travel. The most frequently discussed topics were life and/or living (24.8%), arts and/or entertainment (12.8%), buying and/or using services (12.2%), buying products (10.3%), and technology and/or science (10.6%).

*Research Question 9:* What locations were most frequently reported for WOM episodes?

**TABLE 2: Frequency Counts and Percentages for Topics Surrounding Word-of-Mouth Episodes**

<i>Topic Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Life and/or living <sup>a</sup>	517	24.8
Arts and/or entertainment <sup>b</sup>	267	12.8
Buying and/or using services	255	12.2
Technology and/or science	222	10.6
Buying products	216	10.3
Health	118	5.7
Workplace and/or professional <sup>c</sup>	90	4.3
Hobbies	84	4.0
Sports	67	3.2
Education and/or learning	64	3.1
News and/or current events	58	2.8
Travel	48	2.3
Miscellaneous	34	1.6
Home	20	1.0
Animals and/or pets	18	0.9
Total	2088	100.0

a. Life and/or living subcategories included (from most to least frequent): family (99, 4.7%), special events (88, 4.2%), food and/or dining (73, 3.5%; such as favorite foods and restaurants), casual (61, 2.9%), review (46, 2.2%), relationships (44, 2.1%), plans (26, 1.2%), support (21, 1.0%), and routine, community, family planning, gossip (coded separately from workplace gossip), religion, lifestyle options, and meaning of life (all less than 1.0% each).

b. Arts and/or entertainment subcategories included movies, music, television, theater and/or concerts, culinary and/or cooking (often referred to recipes and cookbooks), fashion and/or culture, and literature.

c. Workplace and/or professional may mean the topic of talk was "about work" or it could also mean it was "about work at work." Generally, the subcategory *workplace and/or professional: work* (28, 1.3%) was used when the talk was "about work"; however, it was not clear if the talk was done at work.

The three most common locations for WOM episodes were in a home (either the respondent's or his or her conversational partner's; 39.7%), at work (21.6%), and in a commercial environment (such as a bar, restaurant, store, hair salon, barber, etc.; 13.7%). Other locations included on a college campus (4.1%), a community area (such as a church or meeting room; 4.0%), high school (3.4%), recreation facility (such as a bowling alley or on a tennis court; 1.6%), at a party (1.5%), and in a library (0.4%). The location for 10% of the WOM episodes was not clear (e.g., "in a car," "walking," or a geographic location was provided, such as "Canada").

*Research Question 10:* What activities were most frequently reported during WOM episodes?

Approximately 55% of the agents reported an activity during the WOM episode. The five most common activities included eating (12.6%), working (6.8%), browsing the Internet (4.8%), child care (4.2%), and watching television (4%). Other activities were listening to music (3.8%), housework (3.5%), talking to someone else (3.4%), shopping (3.2%), driving (1.8%), studying (1.2%), and reading (0.7%). Approximately 6% selected Other and wrote in 20 other activities, such as exercising, grooming and/or dressing, and doing a hobby, each representing well under 1% of the total responses.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this article is to provide a descriptive basis for understanding the relational and communicative basis of WOM and buzz marketing practices. The findings reported here enable researchers, practitioners, and social commentators to use the results as a foundation for claims about effectiveness of buzz marketing practices, and for reflecting on social and ethical concerns. There are also implications for organizations considering using buzz campaigns to facilitate their marketing efforts.

### EFFECTIVENESS AND ETHICS OF BUZZ MARKETING

*Frequency of interactions and WOM episodes.* If one goal of a buzz marketing campaign is to facilitate the creation of more WOM episodes, then there is some evidence that suggests buzz marketing agents engage in more WOM than their nonagent counterparts. When agents were matched with nonagents by education level and age, agents had, on average, 30% more interactions, 97% more WOM episodes, and 117% higher E/I ratio. Thus, it is not just that agents “talk more,” but more significantly, a higher number and



percentage of agents' interactions include WOM episodes. Furthermore, agents were significantly more likely to make recommendations about the brand, organization, product, or service than nonagents. The fact that these buzz marketing agents were much more likely to engage in WOM than nonagents is interesting because the agents in the current study were not specifically targeted or selected to become buzz marketing agents. Although some buzz marketing organizations use elaborate screening processes or proprietary metrics to identify "influential" people in the general population and then select them to participate in campaigns (Walker, 2004), the agents in the current study self-selected themselves out of the general population to affiliate with this agency. The findings from the current study seem to lend support to the philosophy that elaborate filtering mechanisms are not necessary to identify and target people to become buzz marketing agents; instead, people can also self-select into the process and be effective at creating significant amounts of buzz.

*Everyday versus institutional WOM.* A key finding was that a significant majority of agents' WOM episodes were everyday in nature, meaning that they were not part of an institutionally sponsored buzz marketing campaign. There are three important implications of this finding. First, some social commentators have expressed reservations about buzz marketing on the grounds that social networks would be flooded with buzz and that agents would continually and strategically be looking for ways to build in buzz to their conversations (Vranica, 2005; Walker, 2004). The results of the current study do not support this argument. Although agents clearly engaged in more WOM than everyday people, this WOM was not always, or not even primarily, regarding a product or service they were buzzing. Furthermore, the majority of the interactions surrounding the WOM episodes were not preplanned; 24% of the agents' interactions were planned in advance compared to 17% for nonagents (slightly higher but not statistically significant).

Second, these findings also raise the question of whether or not a buzz agent is always a buzz agent for any WOM episodes in which she or he engages. The current study shows some similarities and differences between "institutional" and "everyday" buzz suggesting that the distinction is helpful for analytic purposes. In addition,

though, it would be important to find out from the buzz agents if they perceive such a distinction, and equally important, if their conversational partners do. For example, if one participant does not know that the other is a buzz marketer (either from an intent to hide the identity or deceive the other, or simply because it does not emerge in the conversation) does that interaction count as buzz? Capturing dyadic perceptions and insight into the relational history of the partners, as is described in the section on future research, will permit more definitive answers to such questions.

A third implication of the finding that more agent WOM is everyday rather than institutional may be a concern for the buzz marketing organization, or a client of a buzz marketing organization. Agencies might view their agents as inefficient, or clients might wonder why they are paying an agency to have a majority of the agents' interactions not be about their brands. However, these interpretations should be resisted for the following reason: If the foundation of effective WOM is trust and sincere concern for the interests of the other (Murray, 1991), then these would likely be undermined if all agents did was go around spreading buzz about the campaign brand. As previously cited research on everyday communication suggests, the talk that is not about brand-related products and services lays an important foundation for brand-related talk. Agencies, or their clients, would not, or should not, want the agents to primarily engage in institutional WOM because then others in their social network would likely tune them out. The effectiveness of their buzz would simply become additional "noise" to which traditional advertising and marketing messages have fallen prey. Thus agencies and their clients should take some comfort in the fact that agents are not continually spreading buzz.

*Valence.* The findings about valence of WOM episodes are also relevant to effectiveness and social concerns about buzz marketing. The agents' institutional buzz was, on average, slightly more positive than the agents' everyday WOM. Furthermore, agents were less likely to engage in negative WOM than nonagents. These two findings, taken together, seem to suggest that agents are more positive about the brands, products, or services they are buzzing than for those with which they do not have an institutional affiliation. This represents a potential social concern because it appears that

agents' WOM may indeed be affected by institutional influence, leading them to talk more positively about a brand than they otherwise might.

Walker (2004) discussed a number of reasons why buzz marketing agents might be more likely to talk positively about brands they are buzzing, including that the agents self-select into campaigns in which they are already interested, that poorer quality products may be filtered out by the agency when choosing to work with potential clients, and because agents might feel an implicit obligation to talk positively about a product that has been given free to them. It is interesting to note, though, that nonagents (i.e., no institutional affiliation) reported more positive talk than agents, so the presence of positive talk among agents may not be much of a concern at all. Perhaps the bigger concern, especially from the agency's perspective, is the less frequent occurrence of negative talk; that is, if conversational partners believe someone is willing to engage in negative talk and positive talk the conversational partner may perceive the other to be more honest and credible. Thus, if agents' conversational partners perceive a balance of negative and positive comments, the partners may also be more likely to view the agent as more credible, which will likely lead to more effective WOM.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

First, an overwhelming majority of WOM episodes (nearly 80%) for agents and nonagents occur in face-to-face interpersonal settings, whereas online WOM accounted for only 7% to 10% of the reported episodes. A recent NOP World survey of 1,000 adult Americans (age 18 years and older) confirmed the high incidence of face-to-face WOM (Keller & Berry, 2005). This study found that 80% of the general public made a WOM recommendation face-to-face in the past year, whereas 37% said they sent an e-mail, 32% forwarded an e-mail, and 8% posted a review online. Thus, the majority of the WOM action still seems to be happening in the offline world. These findings are especially provocative because they emerge at a time when more and more organizations are paying attention to how their brands are discussed online (Bailey, 2004), and recent academic research has focused on online WOM

(Godes & Mayzlin, in press; Kiecker & Cowles, 2001; Mayzlin, 2001). Thus it is important for organizations to keep online and offline conversations on their radar screen. Organizations should not neglect stimulating WOM through face-to-face contact and should seek to understand how these interactions are carried out in the context of everyday routines, all in addition to tracking and learning more about the online conversations.

Second, not all WOM is created equal. The frequency of interactions and WOM episodes varied by the relationship shared between the conversational partners, and this relational basis interacted with the day of the week on which the WOM episode occurred. For example, best friends had a relatively low number of interactions, and a low number of WOM episodes, but had the highest percentage of their interactions include a WOM episode (It is interesting to note, best friends also had the longest interactions, on average, which may partially explain why there were fewer numbers of interactions and episodes reported). Friends had the highest number of WOM episodes across all days of the week. Romantic partners and/or spouses had a higher number of interactions and WOM episodes on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays than all other days. This information can be useful to agencies and organizations when making decisions on which relationship types to target for a WOM campaign, and/or for which day of the week to release a campaign. For example, Godes and Mayzlin (2004) suggested that acquaintances are the best relationship type to target to reap higher frequencies of marginal WOM. Findings from the current study suggest that acquaintance interaction is lowest on the weekends but builds on Mondays and hits its peak on Tuesdays. Thus, if a WOM campaign wanted to target acquaintances, it might make sense to release the campaign just before the highest number of acquaintance interactions tends to occur (i.e., on a Monday rather than a Friday). However, other factors might also affect the decision of when to begin a campaign, such as when agents are more likely to open and read e-mail messages announcing a new campaign (Matt McGlenn, personal communication, April 12, 2005).

Third, WOM marketing takes place in a communicative context. Traditionally, marketing is seen as something that organizations do at or to their audiences (citizens, consumers, members, students, etc.). However, WOM marketing is more likely to be consumer

generated and/or shared between consumers (Godin, 2001; Ozcan, 2004). What the current study adds to our understanding of the consumer-generated aspect of WOM is the conversational context of WOM episodes, such as the relationship of the parties interacting (acquaintances, friends, relatives, etc.), the topics of talk surrounding the WOM episode (often tangential to the discussion of a specific brand), activities done during the episode, and the locations in which the episodes occur. Each piece of information on its own may only be of passing interest; however, potential value lies in putting the pieces together. For example, by attending to the conversational context an organization might learn that friends and family members are most often surprised to hear about the health benefits of a particular food product, or that another product commonly gets discussed with strangers and acquaintances on public transportation, or that a brand often gets talked about when people are interested in buying or using a related product or service. The mapping of this conversational geography might result in redesigning product packaging to highlight what people find surprising, or to "seed" a product in particular kinds of social networks or locations where such products tend to get discussed, or to encourage people to talk about a product, service, or idea in ways that are meaningful to people's everyday lives.

### **LIMITATIONS OF STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

There are a number of limitations to the current study which give rise to future research avenues. First, the current study included only one buzz marketing organization and one type of buzz marketing organization. Future research could look at agencies that adopt a different business model, such as those who pay their agents to spread buzz rather than working with volunteers, or who do not allow their agents to disclose their identities. Different business models may also pose different kinds of, or greater, ethical concerns. Second, the notification of agents by only announcing the study on the Web site, and not also notifying agents by e-mail, may have led to a systematic bias of those who actively scanned the

agency's Web site. Future research should also notify agents via e-mail or some other channel. Third, the comparisons made to everyday people were based on a small convenience sample that was limited to college students age 18 to 29 years. A more representative sample would allow for more general comparisons. Fourth, the current study relied only on the perceptions of one conversational partner rather than dyadic or network perceptions. Future research should involve dyadic and network perceptions of WOM episodes by asking all conversational parties to complete the Word-of-Mouth Communication Log (a promising research design is provided by Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger, & Yale, 1998).

Fifth, the current study did not look at actual conversations but reports about conversations. Investigating actual interactions will allow researchers and practitioners to understand conversational trajectories and how people move into, around, and out of WOM episodes, as well as how agents manage their institutional identities as buzz marketing agents. As noted above, because everyday talk is a basic human process that often includes WOM episodes, the important issue for WOM marketers may be less in identifying and labeling individuals as influential and more in how to turn the everyday talk about other topics that is already going on toward the topic marketers want discussed; investigating actual WOM and buzz interactions is a step in this direction. Sixth, the social consequences of interpersonal influence model suggests that relationship history of the conversational partners will affect perceptions of communication (Carl & Duck, 2004). Subsequent research could conduct interviews with participants to determine how prior interactions affect interpretations of current interactions, especially in terms of salient issues to WOM like *trust*, *sincerity*, *credibility*, and *honesty* (a promising research design that looks at interactions and accounts of the interaction is provided by Arliss, 1989/1990).

Seventh, the current study neglected to include a question about whether or not agents' institutional identity emerged in the interaction. A question could be included on the WOMCL asking agents to report whether their institutional identity emerged in the interaction, and if so, was it by themselves, by their conversational partner, mutually, coincidentally, and so on. Finally, the planned versus spontaneous natures of WOM episodes could be clarified on future versions of the WOMCL survey by asking two separate questions

about whether the entire interaction was planned versus spontaneous and whether the WOM episode was planned versus spontaneous. In the current study, respondents were asked only one question about whether the interaction surrounding the WOM episode was planned. This distinction is consequential because, for example, an agent could plan on interacting with a conversational partner (such as for a lunch date) but not plan to bring up brand-related talk; conversely, the agent could plan on buzzing a brand with a person but end up doing so during an unplanned encounter.

## CONCLUSION

Research on WOM about brands, products, and services has often been conducted under the label of *word-of-mouth marketing*; however, the focus on marketing may distract organizational managers from what is really going on. WOM takes place within a context of everyday, routine, relational interactions; this point has been noted by Arndt (1967) and further confirmed in the current study by the findings that relationship type is significant across interactions, WOM episodes, and E/I ratio, that more established relationships (best friends, friends, relatives, and romantic partners and/or spouses) have the highest percentages of their interactions involve a WOM episode, and that life and/or living was the most frequently cited category for interactions surrounding WOM episodes. And like other routine forms of interaction, WOM allows people to make sense of their world, their place in it, and the rightness of their views (Carl & Duck, 2004). Thus, the take-home point from the current study is that, as predicted by recent discussions of everyday communication in the communication literature, effective WOM and buzz marketing is not rooted in the marketing of a particular brand, product, or service but rather is based in the everyday relationships and conversations of people discussing other matters.



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