

8 principles to harness the power of advocacy

Denise Turner, Media Planning Group, describes how research has helped to articulate the role of word of mouth in media planning

THERE ARE MANY different ways to define the modern era. From a media perspective, however, it arguably comes down to three common trends. First, there has been a huge increase in commercial noise. Consumers are exposed to an ever-expanding variety of commercial messages. Second, people today have a plethora of choice in all areas of life, from media to products to holidays. Third, those very consumers, faced with more messages and more choice, have less time to process them. In short, the world is a minefield of information and choice.

So how do consumers navigate this minefield? They look for trusted guides and ways to sift through the choices and help them make decisions. And the one source upon which they are increasingly reliant on is each other. Independent research, marketing data and consumer behaviour persistently point to advocacy or word of mouth being the most active dynamic influence on brand preference, product choice and customer behaviour. According to the Henley Centre, 90% of people believe information passed on by family and friends, and 89% of consumers now recommend products or services they like to others.

The hot topic

Word of mouth has become a hot topic in recent years with new research studies accompanied by a rebirth in marketing literature - books such as *The Tipping Point* being a prime example. It is not, however, a new phenomenon - a cursory search of the web reveals research from the 1950s onwards concluding that word of mouth is an effective marketing tool. In fact it is often described as the key to reducing the risk associated with purchase.

If a purchase decision was influenced by a recommendation, then people are more likely to feel reassured and happy with the outcome and are more likely to recommend to others in their turn, thereby increasing exponentially the effect of the first recommendation. A 1966 article

from the *Harvard Business Review* details work by Dichter, who analysed 6,000 purchase decisions and found that word of mouth played a role in 80% of them.

So the implications are huge. If advocacy is one of the most important ways by which consumers find out about brands, then harnessing it becomes an attractive and effective marketing channel. The biggest challenge facing marketers and their clients today is to uncover how advocacy works in order to discover ways to use it.

Meeting the challenge

To meet that challenge MPG conducted an in-depth research project with Hauck Research. Our objective was to explore the patterns of referral and recommendation behaviour, and to understand how that works to increase awareness, trial and product use. We know from previous work by Hauck that the advocacy process is very different by category, so after setting the context we focused on a key sector: food and drink.

Specifically, we wanted to look at three areas, as follows.

1. Who refers products and services?

- ▶ Who are the advocates in a sector?
- ▶ How can we identify them for targeting?
- ▶ Who starts messages off?
- ▶ Who passes them on?

2. How do they find out about products and services?

- ▶ What is the influence of different media channels?

3. What do they talk about?

- ▶ What messages are they likely to pass on?

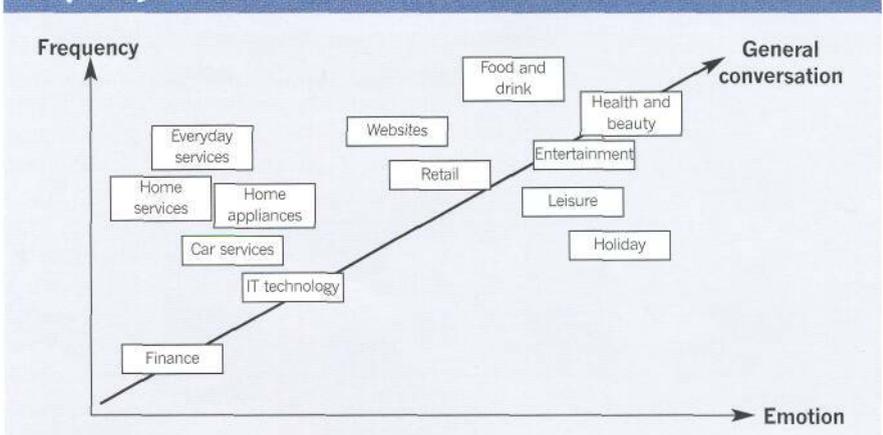
The research was conducted in spring/summer 2004 in conjunction with Hauck Research, which has developed expertise in this area. Our aim was to delve deep and really understand the process of advocacy and its power as a marketing tool. We therefore used a series of different qualitative techniques to uncover the motivations and drivers for advocacy. These included extensive referral diaries, in-depth interviews, focus groups, childhood games such as Chinese whispers, and stickiness callbacks.

The eight principles of advocacy planning

We wanted the research to give us guidance on how we could enhance the power of communications for our clients. Ultimately it delivered some guidelines for ensuring that planning for advocacy for our clients' brands could be at the heart of all of our communications solutions. These guidelines can be summarised into eight key principles.

FIGURE 1

Frequency of word of mouth



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1 Some things are more interesting than others

Figure 1 shows that the frequency and levels of advocacy for a sector are very much dependent on the levels of risk and emotion involved. The greater the risk, the less advocacy there is. For instance, if I recommend my car mechanic to you and he does a bad job, it reflects badly on me - hence there is more risk inherent in recommendation of car mechanics. However, the little advocacy there is in such categories can have a disproportionately big impact, as people look for ways to reduce risk in purchase decisions in trickier categories.

On the flip-side, the more emotion involved, the more advocacy there is. Food and drink, for instance, are topics of general conversation, close to most people's hearts (and stomachs), so they get talked about a lot more.

Even within a category there can be wide variation - within food and drink, for instance, food receives around 75% of all the messages passed on. Food is easier to talk about than drink - the drink category, and wine in particular, suffers from a need for knowledge before recommendation, not only about the brand/product on the part of the giver but also about the tastes of the recipient.

2 Men do it differently

Gender plays a big role in determining the level of advocacy. It is a truth universally acknowledged that women like to talk. They are more likely to be networkers and pass on messages. They love passing on messages they know are relevant to friends and family. They are willing to pass on the whole message and will even embellish to make it more relevant. A great many of the healthy messages that do the rounds are given and received among women.

Men, on the other hand, are less willing to pass on the whole message and only pass on what they find relevant or interesting themselves. They have,

therefore, a high potential to shut down messages. They are generally keener to talk about subjects where they can demonstrate knowledge. Wine is one of those particular areas, where some men will wax lyrical and show off how much they know. They are definitely less interested in healthy messages in food advocacy.

3 Kids change your life

There is power in affinity - the closer the relationship, the higher the volume of advocacy. A high volume of referrals is among friends, work colleagues and acquaintances. People tend over time to develop more same-lifestage contacts than different-lifestage contacts. People build up knowledge of their friends' needs and interests, thereby ensuring word of mouth is targeted and relevant.

Lifestage changes, such as marriage and children, dramatically increase advocacy, as people desperately need advice about the new stage - hence the heading 'Kids change your life'. At these stages in life people tend to gravitate to others who are experiencing the same changes.

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4 Stickiness is key

Not all your brand messages will be sticky - not all of them will be taken up and passed on. Qualitative research by category is key to finding out how to make your message sticky, as well as finding the best communications vehicles in which to place it. Getting this right will ensure the money spent on communications is enhanced and works as hard as possible.

We did extensive research into what makes a sticky message for food. The key areas of discussion for consumers revolve around taste, convenience and health. Consumers believe these three areas form the three corners of a food-conflict triangle. By conflict, we mean that they assume there is no way any brand or product can fit all three corners, so compromises have to be made. The messages they will talk about revolve around finding solutions to this conflict. If a food product does meet all three criteria, it will become a hot topic and be passed on.

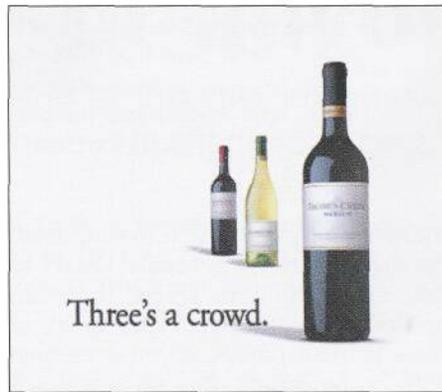
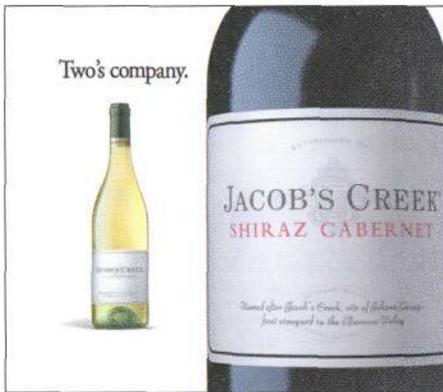
In addition, a food product needs to create some kind of new news to provide standout and WOM value. New editions of chocolate bars give consumers permission to try them because they have not had them before. Taste on its own is powerful, but creates greater volume if it also resolves the conflict triangle in some other way.

5 Know your initiators from your networkers

The research confirmed previous work in identifying two key types of people in the advocacy process: initiators and networkers. Both are clearly identifiable and can be targeted for advocacy success.

Initiators are the small group of people who seed messages and can be identified by their attitudes and behaviour in four areas.

► **Research** they are always on the lookout for new ideas and products, have magazine subscriptions, and so on. ►



Jacob's Creek: Sponsorship of *Friends* helped the brand simplify a difficult choice

- ▶ **Adventurous** always first to try new products.
- ▶ **Knowledge** trusted and asked for opinions.
- ▶ **Behaviour** refer products to others regularly.

Initiators are people who do not always volunteer information but sometimes seed messages just by their actions. They are often the people that others go to for advice and information because they are knowledgeable and an expert in that field. By definition, then, people are generally not initiators in lots of categories.

In the food category initiators can be icons or famous people. Delia Smith is well known for initiating sales of omelette pans and Jamie Oliver has initiated a whole new style of cooking.

Networkers are the social oil of any group; they love to pass on their learnings and are adept at targeting their referrals - they know what their friends like and will actively pass on relevant information. Particularly in food, they may even buy a product that's on three for two or buy one get one free and give one to a friend to try - the best type of word of mouth. Networkers can be identified in a number of ways; for example, they often have lots of friends' numbers programmed into their mobile phone, they have a full social diary, booked weeks in advance - they fuel the interactions of any group.

6 You don't have to talk

Words are not always necessary to ensure brand recommendation. Advocacy is normally explicit, but product and service referrals can also be implicit. In food and drink the level of implicit recommenda-

tions is at least a quarter of the total - this is mostly down to the nature of the category, which is consumed publicly as well as privately. Implicit referrals can take the form of observing - looking in other people's trolleys. Or they can be about eavesdropping - hearing people talk about a great wine they tried. Or sometimes they are simply about tasting - trying a product in the supermarket. A successful taste experience is a recommendation or a referral - often described by people as the brand 'recommending itself.

7 Brands are good

Brand advertising is, therefore, key to establishing safe credentials, to reduce the risk of wrong choices. In food, brands provide taste reassurance and a reasonable level of security and reliability that the product is going to deliver. In wine, consumers are often overwhelmed, not only by the array of products on offer but also by the fear they will buy a wine they do not like - or, worse still, that they will take a bad wine to a dinner party. Brands help people navigate complex categories and provide a way through the maze. In such categories it is important to maximise awareness so you become a focal point for people. This was done very successfully in wine by Jacob's Creek with its sponsorship of *Friends*.

8 Advertising works!

Despite the fact that many people claim in research that advertising does nothing to influence them or their purchase behaviour, it is clear from this research that advertising and the media are key sources of inspiration for advocacy. This is especially true in food, where advertising and media are key to bringing

ideas to life, encouraging consumers to experiment. People have to find things out somewhere.

Conclusion

The final principle is key for how the communications industry can harness the power of advocacy. When people discuss word-of-mouth activity, they often mean a separate line on the marketing plan. However, if it is so important in the process by which consumers make decisions, then it should be something that runs through the entire plan. This is especially true in an era where the focus is on integrated communications planning: everything we do and every contact with the brand can be a driver of word of mouth.

The principles developed through our research help us to do that - from both a content and a channel perspective. For instance, we can identify the initiators and networkers within a target group and focus communications to reach them. Women are naturally much better at recommending, so for some categories women will be an important audience. For other categories, product experience will be key for recommendation and needs to be woven into the communications activity. This is particularly the case in food. Consumers are exposed to many messages, so we need to develop communications that stand out - our messages need to be sticky to stand any chance of being passed on.

Ultimately we should, therefore, be ensuring that all of our activity works together to create advocacy and thereby harness its power. ■