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The Power of Buzz

By Susan Friedmann, CSP

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How did Hotmail gain over 12 million subscribers in 18 months? How did the very low budget movie "The Blair Witch Project" become such an incredibly successful phenomenon? The answer lies in the power of "buzz."

Buzz or word-of-mouth marketing influences more people to buy, or not to buy products and services, than most other forms of marketing. Why is it so powerful? Basically, we have a need to share information as a means of communication and also as a way of understanding the world around us. Often, we base many of our purchasing decisions on information gleaned from friends and well-respected associates. We tend to listen to them more readily than most mass-media messages.

In his book "The Anatomy of Buzz," Emanuel Rosen states, "most marketing today ignores the power of buzz and tries to influence each customer individually." He believes that "buzz travels through invisible networks that link people together. Noise, skepticism and connectivity all influence today's buzz."

As exhibitors you need go no further than the tradeshow floor to find a network that creates a real buzz. It starts prior to the show, gathers momentum at the show, and then slowly dissipates after the show ends. Every exhibitor has the power to influence the buzz. It all depends on product/service quality, marketing savvy and the decisions made.

I recall visiting a telecommunications show a couple of years ago when the buzz on the show floor concerned a Fortune 100 company and major player in the industry, (who shall remain nameless). The talk centered around the image of their booth which wasn't quite up to expectations. The buzz went like this: "The ABC Company has gone cheap. They must be having financial problems." It's gossip like this that starts the wheels of the "rumor mill" turning and can even create havoc on the Stock Market. Remarks like this often have very little bearing on reality, but people make assumptions and decisions based on what they see and hear. Obviously, the originating source of the buzz plays a key

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role in its basis for truth.

I'm sure that you would much prefer any tradeshow buzz to be positive. Since talking about products/services makes economic sense, how can you use the buzz to add to your existing marketing efforts? I've put together ten guidelines for you to consider:

1. Brainstorm all possible groups of people who might be interested in your products/services. Consider including the media, opinion leaders, influencers, lead users, politicians, analysts, etc. Don't forget chat rooms and newsgroups although buzz still spreads primarily by personal interaction.
2. Research how information spreads among your customers. Ask them how they usually learn about new products/services. Who are their major information sources? Who's information do they value? You're primarily looking for groups of people rather than individuals. However, don't discount individuals, as they may well be a powerful opinion leader.
3. Develop a clear and concise message highlighting the product/service benefits you want to filter through these different groups. Zero in on your product's uniqueness and what it can do, for example, to help save time and money - two basic elements most people seek.
4. Think about ways to tap into these groups to spread the word about your products/services. Use these in addition to your existing marketing efforts. Never rely on just one means of connecting with you target audience. Your credibility is enhanced through different marketing mediums. For example, exhibit marketing could include pre-show advertising, at-show sponsorship and post-show, a trade publication article. The more ways people can hear and see you the better.
5. Offer prospects easy ways to try your product/service. For example, the makers of Pictionary gave demos in parks, shopping centers and other gathering places. The tradeshow floor presents excellent opportunities for this.
6. Come up with other creative ideas to enhance tradeshow show demonstrations. What can you give people to take away to remind them of your company, products and positive show experience. Think about something that will help create the buzz. It'll have to be more creative than a keychain or stress ball. The more product-related the better. You want people to remember and talk about you - positively!
7. Look at special groups whom you might offer a product discount, a loaner or even for free. You're looking for groups/individuals where the direct product experience will help spread the word. For example, when FedEx started out, it offered free shipping to show people how their program worked. America Online continuously finds ways to offer hundreds of free hours of trial usage to entice new users. I recently saw a display of free CDs at WalMart.
8. Use press conferences for major announcements, new product introductions, but only if they are truly new or improved, or general industry trends – what's hot and what's not. Realize that editors are interested in timely newsworthy information; industry trends, statistics, new technology or product information. The media get very upset attending a press conference which is poorly organized and

where there's nothing newsworthy.

9. Use sneak previews at tradeshow to build anticipation and help create a buzz on the show floor. Give people a fun experience and a behind the scenes view of what's coming. TV and the movies have got this down to a fine art with their coming attractions. Siemens just did this extremely successfully at the recent CTIA show in Las Vegas. They organized a live marketing presentation with a futuristic theme that featured a digital phone prototype. They certainly created a buzz, which had people, including myself inquiring about the product's availability.

10. Make use of tradeshow to educate your target audience. People are hungry for information. Investigate opportunities to speak either during the workshop sessions or incorporate an educational session into your display.

The power of buzz far exceeds many conventional marketing vehicles. It is probably the oldest, most well-used and valuable one out there. Look at how you can make it an integral part of your existing marketing plan to influence the voices in your industry.

Written by Susan A. Friedmann, CSP, The Tradeshow Coach, Lake Placid, NY, author: "Meeting & Event Planning for Dummies," working with companies to improve their meeting and event success through coaching, consulting and training. Go to

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Yahoo! Does It Again... But We're Not Sure What `It' Is!

By Eddie SanMarco

If you've searched with Y! lately - at least in some browsers - you may have noticed a new addition to their search result's page. If you use Netscape or Firefox, the upper right-hand corner of your search result's page now holds an orange box that holds - The Buzz. Yahoo!'s Buzz Log has been around for a few years, but you used to have to go looking for it to find out what people were Buzzing about. Now Y! puts it in your face - and frankly, I'm not sure what all it's good for.

For those of you who aren't up to speed on the Yahoo Buzz, here's a quick recap. Every day, Yahoo records all the searches that are entered on its pages. Over the next twenty four hours, those searches are indexed, tabulated, calculated and sorted, and the next day - 48 hours later - Y! publishes `the Buzz Index' in a number of different forms. Want to know what was on people's minds two days ago? You can get a quick snapshot by checking today's Buzz Index page. There's a Buzz Index for entertainment, movies, music, sports, movie stars and overall. But what's it all mean? Here it is straight from the horse's mouth:

A subject's buzz score is the percentage of Yahoo! users searching for that subject on a given day,

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multiplied by a constant to make the number easier to read. Weekly leaders are the subjects with the greatest average buzz score for a given week.

So... it's an index of the most popular searches on Yahoo! The Buzz publishes daily, weekly and monthly stats, so you can track trends over time. You can even get a subscription to the Yahoo Buzz Index and personalize it with customized search terms - but those don't show up in your search results page when you do a search—you have to go to your Buzz Index page for them. What does show up is the top ten general daily searches. In fact, for today, no matter what I'm actually searching for, here's what I get in that little box:

1.pussycat dolls 2.NFL draft grades 3.the ultimate fighter 4.may 1 boycott 5.Madonna tickets
6.Howard stern 7.Chinese astrology 8.project runway 9.Terence Howard 10.Bahamas hotels

So exactly what is the point of plopping that orange box in one of the prime pieces of SERP real estate? It doesn't tell me anything relevant to my search (I searched for test scores, for nursing degrees and for consumer index). If I click on one of the ranked items, it feeds me the search results for that term. If I click on 'More Buzz' at the bottom, it takes me to the Buzz Index where I can read the latest blog entry.

To make it even more useless, the Buzz box only works in a few browsers. In the others, there's either a blank column - or the Sponsor Results - which at least are contextually related to what I'm searching. Where's the value added? About the only thing that it does is clutter up a space that could be used so much more profitably.

Now if Y! wanted to actually make this thing useful, here are a few suggestions.

First - make it contextually sensitive. If I type in a search for 'tests,' I'd find a list of related popular searches a WHOLE lot more useful than knowing that most of America is searching for info on the Pussycat Dolls two days ago.

Second, never mind the ranking - give me the numbers! How many people searched for Pussycat Dolls? Maybe it's something I should know about, hmm?

Third - move it! I don't refer to that place as 'prime real estate' for nothing. The upper right hand corner of your browser is one of the first places the eye lands on a page. It's one of the reasons that you put important things in that space when you're designing your pages. Why waste it?

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