

The Four Rules of Word of Mouth Marketing

Being a great word of mouth marketer doesn't require an advanced degree, a big budget, or a ton of resources. Just focus on these four fundamentals and you'll get a bunch of happy customers talking about you, for free, forever.



Rule #1: Be Interesting

Nobody talks about boring companies, boring products, or boring ads. If you want people to talk about you, you've got to do something special. Anything. If you are boring, you'll never get a moment of conversation. Your word of mouth will fall flat on its face. (Actually, it will just fade away, unnoticed.)

Before you run an ad, before you launch a product, before you put something new on the menu, ask the magic question: Would anyone tell a friend about this?

Take a trick from the Chicago Bagel Authority's 56 bizarrely named sandwiches, like the Hoosier Daddy and the Muenster Mash. Or the seven-inch-high corned beef sandwiches at New York's famous Carnegie Deli. It would still be the best corned beef sandwich in the world if it were a normal size. But its insane mass guarantees that hundreds of tourists leave the restaurant every day to spread the word about one of the greatest sights in the Big Apple.

There are probably hundreds of shoeshine stands in New York City. But everybody goes to Eddie's in Grand Central Station. They tell their friends to make a special trip to go there (passing plenty of other good shoeshine stands on the way). Why? Eddie's has huge, comfy, old-fashioned, red leather easy chairs to sit in. You feel like a king when you sit back and enjoy a few minutes of peace in those chairs at the end of the day.

Give people a reason to talk about you.

And please, I beg you, stop for a minute before you buy more advertising. Think about how much money you are about to spend. Think about how fast you, and everyone else in the world, flip past hundreds of ads without even noticing them.

Don't run another ad unless it is truly worth talking about.

Rule #2: Make It Easy

Word of mouth is lazy. You've got to help it along if you expect it to go anywhere.

You need to do two things: Find a super-simple message and help people share it.

Start with a topic that anyone can remember. Something like, "Our software doesn't crash," or "They have chocolate cream cheese!" or "They give you snacks while you're waiting for a table," or "Stupid name, but it sure does work." (Anything longer than a sentence is too much. It'll get forgotten or mangled.)

We all think of Steve Jobs as the greatest computer marketer who ever lived. So what did he do when he returned to Apple in 1996 with the mission of reviving a stumbling company? Did he talk about great software? Stable operating systems? No.

Jobs' great marketing insight was ... pink and purple computers.

It got everyone talking. It restarted positive word of mouth about the company. Everyone told a friend, because they had a simple topic of conversation that was interesting to share. And when people heard about the cute computers, they were ready to take another look at the more important features.

Once you've got your big word of mouth idea, find a bunch of ways to make it easier to spread. There are countless easy ways to make your ideas portable. A special announcement on a website or brochure is stuck in place. But when you put it in an email or post it to a social network, it's in motion.

Rule #3: Make People Happy

Happy customers are your greatest advertisers.

Thrill them. Create amazing products. Provide excellent service. Go the extra mile. Make the experience remarkable. Fix problems. Make sure the work you do gets people energized, excited, and eager to tell a friend.

When people like you, they share you with their friends. They want to help you, they want to support your business, and they want their friends to enjoy what you offer. You will get more word of mouth from making people happy than anything else you could possibly do.

Let's look at one of the great mysteries of the modern age. In 1999, why did 60,000 people drive their plain Saturn sedans to Spring Hill, Tennessee, to meet the people who made them? What car could possibly be less interesting than a Saturn?

The annual Saturn Homecoming was a great word of mouth marketing strategy. But it wouldn't have worked if people didn't trust and respect Saturn. People really liked the company. They liked its attitude. They felt taken care of by the nice salespeople and the company's no-haggle concept. They were amazed when they got a friendly note twice a year with instructions on how to adjust the clock for daylight saving time.

So they told their friends. They supported the company that supported them.

Let's look at another great mystery of the modern age. Why do some people like Target so much? This I won't attempt to explain, but I'm not the only guy who, while on vacation, has been taken to visit a Target that looks exactly like the one we have at home. (Aargh.) But they have some stylish stuff. Decent prices. Clean stores. A fun attitude.

Target makes my wife happy in a way that would threaten a less manly man.

And she talks to everyone about it.

Rule #4: Earn Trust and Respect

If you don't have respect, you don't get good word of mouth.

Nobody talks positively about a company that they don't trust or like. Nobody puts their name on the line for a company that will embarrass them in front of their friends.

Always be an honorable company. Make ethics part of everything you do. Be good to your customers. Talk to them. Fulfill their needs.

Make people proud to tell your story to everyone they know.

Southwest Airlines is one of the most trusted brands in the world. It treats its customers well, with few hassles and a great attitude. It treats its employees well, with stable jobs, a no-layoff policy, and decent pay. People like Southwest. People like the company so much that they sent cash to the airline after 9/11 to help it out.

Lots of people are spreading great word of mouth about Southwest. Does anyone have anything good to say about most other airlines?

Every company can be nicer, and every employee can work to make his or her company a little better to its customers.

My bank, Washington Mutual, offers pretty much the same services as every other bank. But they are really nice. Really, really nice. Tom and Abby remember my name and my wife's name. They even remember my baby's name, and she doesn't do much banking.

I banked at one of the top three banks for ten years, and at one time my company had more than \$1 million on deposit. I could barely get them to cash a check or take my calls. And after a while, the random, punitive fees started to eat away any respect I had for this venerable institution. Negative word of mouth from people like me has sent a whole lot of money to banks that treat people better.