Purpose of Word-Of-Mouth: a Conceptual Model

Aliosha Alexandrov, University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh, USA
Emin Babakus, University of Memphis, USA

The literature suggests that the intention to engage in Word-of-Mouth (WOM) depends primarily on the satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the brand. The perspective we take herein is that WOM is a socially embedded process instigated by explicit and implicit motives. We develop a theoretical model suggesting that WOM also is motivated by the desire to satisfy social- and self-related needs. Based on relevant theories, we identify several variables affecting the connection between satisfaction with the brand and WOM: the need for social comparison, the need for social bonds, and the intention to share social and personal information. We also recognize that self-related needs like self-enhancement and self-affirmation play a key role in the process.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We develop a theoretical model explaining why people engage in Word-of-Mouth (WOM). The research question that we attempt to answer is not the typical: “What motivates people to share WOM?” but a broader one: “What purpose does WOM serve?” The literature suggests that the intention of WOM depends primarily on satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the brand (Anderson 1998; Bowman and Narayandas 2001; Ladhari 2007; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). However, WOM can be used to achieve goals unrelated to the brand, for example, to express achievement, or to seek confirmation, therapeutic feeling, or retaliation (Cheung, Anitsal, and Anitsal 2007; Sweeney, Soutr, and Mazzarol 2008). The perspective we take is that WOM is a socially embedded process instigated by explicit and implicit motives.

Several streams of research provide the theoretical foundations for this approach: 1) the social comparison theory: as an internal drive for a person to compare his abilities and opinions to others (Festinger 1954); 2) the social learning theory: as the ability to learn vicariously from others’ opinions and behaviors (Bandura 1969; Bandura 1971); 3) the social exchange theory: as the notion that people never do anything without expectations for personal gain (Blau 1986; Emerson 1976); 4) gossip: as a social phenomenon informing people about social norms (Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs 2004; Dunbar 1998; Wert and Salovey 2004). We also focus on the theories for self-affirmation (Sherman and Cohen 2006) and the need for self-enhancement (Jones 1973) as motives for social interaction. The model is based on the fact that behavior can be motivated by implicit as well as explicit motives (McClelland, Koestner, and Weinberger 1989). Explicit motives result from planned intentions, and implicit motives result from the desire to satisfy self- and socially-related needs. The relationship between attitudes and needs goes like this: attitudes can lead to evaluation of alternative actions, and if an action is expected to satisfy a need, then it is preferred. Therefore, the presence of a high or low attitude is an opportunity to engage in an action that can satisfy a need, but it does not create the need. It is important to recognize that it is not the need that matters, but the expected satisfaction level of this need.

The particular theoretical model we advance includes WOM as the main outcome variable, and satisfaction with the brand as the main independent variable. Several groups of variables affect this relationship: self-related needs (i.e., self-enhancement and self-affirmation), socially-related needs (i.e., need for social comparison and need for social bonding), and the intentions to share personal and social information. Self-related needs are related to individual well-being, and socially related needs refer to needs that can be satisfied only through social interaction. The specific propositions we develop can be summarized as follows. The socially-related needs are positively affected by the self-related needs. Both the self- and socially-related needs affect the intentions to share information. Finally, WOM is affected by the self- and socially-related needs and the intention to share information.

We propose that the suggested model holds true for both positive and negative WOM. Based on social utility (Loewenstein et al. 1989; Messick and Sentis 1985) as a result of social comparison and the self-attribution bias (Bradley 1978) stating that people praise themselves for success and blame others for failures, we advance propositions about the difference in the magnitude and the signs of the relationships in the theoretical model. The need for self-enhancement will be pronounced more in positive than in negative WOM, and the need for self-affirmation will be pronounced more in negative than in positive WOM. The intention to share information will be pronounced more in negative than in positive WOM. Social needs will be pronounced more in positive than in negative WOM.

In conclusion, this study answers the call for more attention on the social aspects of consumer behavior (Baggozzi 2000; Wright 2002). The proposed theoretical model helps understand the purpose of WOM by recognizing that WOM serves socially and self-related needs. The ultimate gain which the transmitter of WOM gets through social interaction is self-affirmation and self-enhancement. The advanced propositions, related to the cognitive processes motivating WOM, are viable and testable and can serve as a sound framework for future research and marketing management. The managerial applications of this approach can be significant because it allows for contextual control of WOM through facilitated interaction. For example, when designing a promotional strategy with the goal of making customers talking positively, the focus should be not only on the performance of the brand, but also on the ability to make people maintain social relationships. Based on the intention to share information, a promotion can contain stories with social value that are worth sharing (e.g., recopies, jokes, facts, warnings, etc.). The social bond component suggests that the brand should instigate interactions among people that could be achieved, for example, by exchanging or complementing things (e.g., invitations, recommendations, games, group discounts, etc.). Based on the social comparison and the self-enhancement need, a promotional campaign may include competitions, public quizzes, awards, etc. Finally, the self-affirmation need can be addressed by emphasizing customer identity by helping customers connect with similar others or helping them communicate who they are.

REFERENCES


