

How buzz marketing works for teens

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How do you get your brand talked about by the right people, in the right places, for the right reasons? Amy Henry explains the concept of buzz marketing: describing how it can be successfully applied to the teen market, as well as offering some tips to get your brand 'buzzing'.

OVER THE past few years the marketing industry has been buzzing about the very concept of 'buzz'. Agencies have begun to specialise in generating word of mouth, and media experts have turned the most mundane occurrences into experiments in non-traditional marketing. In Chicago, clubs and stores paid actors and comics to stand in line, just to beg the question, 'what are they waiting for?', and in London makers of Red Bull filled rubbish bins in the hippest parts of town with empties to give the illusion of an addictive product – and a potential shortage. Defying convention, Serena Williams became a buzz-causing billboard for Puma when she donned a far-from-tennis-whites black cat suit (a Puma suit, in fact) at the US Open. While these brands may be mavericks in their industries, many mainstream marketers have begun to take note of their tactics.

As many marketers take their fledgling steps into the world of buzz marketing, buzz experts have emerged to provide advice. Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point*, which describes how ideas spread like epidemics (discussed by Procter & Richards in *I&AMC* April–June 2002), has itself been passed around like a virus within the advertising industry – marketers at every rank have challenged their teams to leverage 'buzz' in their marketing plans. But while buzz has been written about in a social context and in a broad marketing context, few writers have discussed more than a 'one size fits all' approach to buzz marketing. This article

examines teens' connection to buzz, and provides a point of view on how messages can create a stir among this target.

Defining buzz

Defining buzz is more than semantics. How we think about the concept of buzz is critical to our ability to create it as marketers. Many marketers have begun to regard 'buzz' as a new discipline within the marketing and media worlds. Like TV advertising, 'buzz' has become a line item on marketing plans. If objectives for reach and frequency are met through traditional vehicles such as TV and print, and there is money left over, marketers may challenge their agencies to experiment with a 'buzz'-creating idea. This challenge provides the first dilemma for marketers who are attempting to create buzz around their brands for the first time: who 'owns' the development of 'buzz' ideas? Is it an advertising agency specialising in creating high-profile brands for the masses? An interactive agency that understands the power of marketing that necessitates consumer involvement? A PR firm, who has mastered the development of powerful messages and sound bites? The answer is: all of the above.

Rather than a single discipline, buzz is interdisciplinary. Rather than a new discipline, buzz is a new way of thinking about existing disciplines. In fact, when we think about 'buzz' as a separate discipline, we sacrifice many opportunities to use 'buzz' effectively to build brands.

- *We ignore the potential of mass marketing vehicles to create buzz.* In fact, TV and print can be extremely effective conveyors of buzz, if a buzzable message is infused in copy.
- *We undervalue the power of buzz to build a brand, and relegate it to second-class citizen status.* Simply put, if 'buzz' is only undertaken once all other objectives are fulfilled, it is clearly not a brand priority, and thus can only expect to bring limited success.
- *We place too much emphasis on the media and we disregard the impact of a powerful message.* If we think about 'buzz' as tactics, we only get half of the equation right. As in TV advertising, it is not enough to be advertised during the Super Bowl – you have to develop messages that are compelling, innovative, relevant and clear.

Buzz requires a different way of thinking about brands. The tactics that generate buzz are sometimes similar to the tactics used in traditional marketing, but we believe that buzz is actually grounded in the disciplines most marketers already know. To understand whether or not buzz can come from traditional media, we reviewed the intention and the objectives regularly met by the most common marketing tactics.

As an example, consider the following disciplines through the lens of buzz.

- PR, especially consumer PR, aims to deliver your message through an expert – who can provide credibility and support for your brand.
 - Event marketing relies on creating an event that you invite consumers to attend.
 - Sports marketing is about connecting your brand or company with athletes – who are larger than life.
- Alternative media usually provide supplemental awareness to your mainstream media.
 - And finally, online marketing has in many cases become an everyday presence – a message in your in box reminding you of a marketer's brand.

Considering these objectives and aims, it is clear that there is an opportunity to examine the benefits of these disciplines from another perspective – one that better fits today's complex and multi-disciplinary culture. In a day and age in which companies are not always trustworthy, does your average consumer value or trust the information given to them by the establishment? In the age of endorsed everything, does the Nike logo on an athlete – or on every athlete – mean as much as it used to, or does it fade into the background? Does online marketing work best when it serves as an everyday reminder, or should it be held in higher regard?

In fact, these marketing disciplines could meet traditional objectives – but when used in innovative ways, grounded in a true understanding of their consumer, they become buzz vehicles. Below are two examples of this.

- When the source of credibility for PR is broadened, and we think of endorsers not only as celebrities and experts but as neighbours and friends, we can begin to see how buzz is related to PR.
- When the principles of event marketing are used to build underground events, we see that events can be discovered, not advertised. It is these subversive events that become worthy of 'buzz'.

Unlike the traditional approach, in which strategy comes first and then media and then content, we think you have to consider your

brand's character first. To be a buzzable brand, you have to be:

- invasive but invited
- individualised
- experiential
- provocative
- conspiratorial
- connective
- creative.

Buzz is not concrete and tangible. We think buzz is a way of being that your brand must embrace before teens will talk about it.

Buzz for old people

So how do we know buzz when we see it? The beauty of buzz is that if it is done well, and targeted at teens, you as an adult may not have seen it. But buzz lives not only in a teen's world, but also flourishes in the adult world. To give you a few examples that you might recognise:

- a Mojito
- a PDA
- *Sex and the City*
- Viagra.

The alcohol industry functions through buzz. What made Cosmos a hot new drink? No one advertises these concoctions (although a few marketers have begun taking this kind of buzz mass, with subway ads all over New York for drinks like Remy Red). Hard alcohol brands know that the best way to get consumers to buy their brands is to introduce them to a cocktail that they can order and that then becomes a status symbol. No one began advertising

Campanihnas and Mojitos, but suddenly they are all over menus and bars...

The technology category is also fuelled by buzz. PDAs are more likely to be purchased based on a friend's recommendation or a glimpse of a co-worker's gadgets than on seeing an advertisement.

Our next example is also a hugely effective way of intentionally influencing people. When Sarah Jessica Parker sports a new bag or a new pair of shoes on *Sex and the City*, Barney's displays it in the window the next day. Product placement is a strategy that has leveraged the philosophy of buzz.

And finally, Viagra is a great example of a product with inherent buzz – it's relevant and provocative. Viagra gave people the chance to talk about a very taboo subject in a very public way. You might be surprised to find pharmaceutical companies included in a list of examples of cutting-edge marketing, but they've been doing this for a long time through professional marketing efforts and sampling.

The teen buzz connection

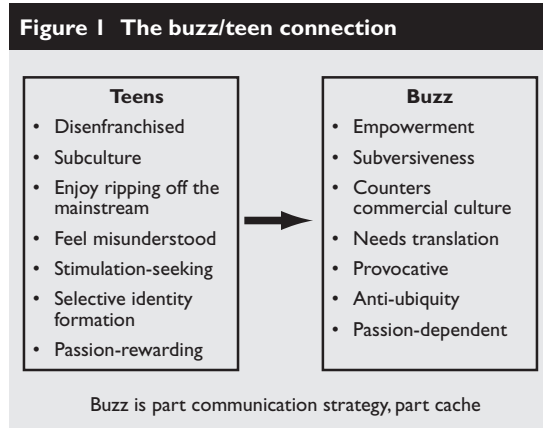
To understand the buzz-teen connection, we first catalogued the benefits that buzz has for a consumer. Then we looked for ways in which this connected with teen psychology and culture. We found that many of the benefits of buzz directly answer the needs of teens.

- Teens feel disenfranchised. They feel they have all the responsibility of adults but they don't have the right to make their own choices; they can't vote; and in the USA they can't drink! Buzz puts the power in their own hands – whether they have the information that they can pass along to friends, or they hear brand messages from other teens.

- Teens are a subculture. They have a distinct language, values and cultural mores. Buzz inherently belongs to the ‘rebellious against’ subculture because it lives beneath the radar of mass marketing.
- Teens are a sub-culture with their own language, values and mores. They are iconoclastic by nature – and so is buzz: it counters commercial culture and lives beneath the radar of mass marketing.
- Teens are inherently stimulation-seeking. We know their brains actually have underdeveloped brain functioning when it comes to making sound, reasoned decisions. Buzz is and must be provocative in order to succeed.
- Teens are engaged in a process of selective identity formation – and buzz is anti-ubiquity. Teens can choose which parts to believe and pass on instead of being overpowered by the loud voice of mass media.
- Finally, teens aspire to be passionate people. To them, this is the most admirable character trait they see in themselves and other teens – and it is the attribute that adults often lack. Buzz depends on passion. It isn’t spread (and therefore it isn’t buzz) unless one person is passionate enough about it to pass it along.

In teen culture, buzz becomes more than just a communication vehicle. Brands that are surrounded by buzz gain a certain mystique that would be difficult for a brand to enforce through advertising.

This should not be surprising: in a culture in which the withholding and the selective leveraging of information is routine, it is not surprising that rumours hold a great deal of influence. Whether it’s sneaking out past curfew – a very active form of information suppression – or spreading a lie to gain peer approval, teens often equate survival within their culture with being



on the ‘right side’ of rumour. But to understand how to create messages that create buzz among teens, it is critical to understand what motivates and compels teens – negatively and positively. Buzz not only leverages existing behaviour within teen culture, but it also fulfils many of the fundamental psychological, social and cultural needs of that segment of society (see Figure 1).

Catalysts of buzz

There are three major drivers that can make messages ‘stick’ among teens:

- (1) truth distorted
- (2) bad behaviour
- (3) reality romanticised.

The first driver, truth distorted, is a fundamental premise of all buzz. Psychologists talk about distortion theory as the way the brain moulds a message to relate to its own needs or the conditions of its specific environment. Anthropologist Richard Dawkins discussed how ideas (or memes) are as vulnerable to the evolutionary game (the survival of the fittest) as

species. In his estimation, only the ‘useful’ memes survive.

Urban legends are a cultural phenomenon that seem to be driven by distortion theory. Urban legends are stories without a known source that are widely spread. As the story spreads, the source is often distorted as much as the story itself. Rather than saying ‘I heard it somewhere’, a person spreading an urban legend begins to unknowingly distort the truth, and accredit the story to an expert of some sort. It becomes what one doctor has called ‘a collective memory of something that never happened’.

Often these stories have an element of truth hidden deep within them. When they spread, they are up for the interpretation of the listener and the speaker. This interpretation passes through a filter of appropriation: to continue to spread a message, something about it must resonate with the listener. Often this involves appropriating the story to the listener’s own cultural norms or conditions. And often the appropriation is provocative.

The result is usually a message that sounds very different than it originally did. One example of this is the film, *The Blair Witch Project*. This low-budget film became a buzz phenomenon when it began to outstrip its highly-marketed competitors through the use of rumour. The legend behind the movie, namely the Blair Witch, became the subject of a fabricated documentary on the Sci-Fi channel, and shortly afterwards became a true urban legend. Convinced that they would find the real Blair Witch, teens in three suburban areas began scouring the woods near their homes.

Pop Rocks is another great example of how a marketer took advantage of a distorted truth about their brand. General Foods stumbled across an idea that appealed to the marketers who tried it, and the kids of these marketers, but

the product didn’t quite fit cleanly within the brand’s portfolio. They wanted to test the brand before they launched it to ensure that the brand would be profitable, but would also not compromise their corporate identity.

They chose three markets that would have very little contact with other markets: Laredo, Wyoming; Billings, Montana; and Flagstaff, Arizona. The marketing was kept intentionally secretive, not because of conspiracy or danger, but because marketers don’t like their competitors to know what new products they’re launching. The ‘rumour’ spread when residents of these towns started talking about the product to ‘outsiders’ and described its unique in-mouth feel (it explodes in the mouth). The interpretation and appropriation: that this was clearly a new government discovered drug that was being hidden from everyday citizens. Knowing that this product was developed in the late 1970s helps to explain this appropriation – government conspiracies and secrets and drugs were the subjects of much of the provocateurs of US culture. A black market for Pop Rocks began – mystifying the marketers who were afraid their pricing – at 25 cents a pack – was too high.

Behaving badly is also a key driver of buzz. We could look at a prominent aspect of teen culture – gossip – to test our theory. The gossip that spreads inevitably oozes of sex, fear, mystery, risk and danger. The messages are provocative and conspiratorial to say the least. We analysed some marketing examples of buzz among teens in order to validate our theory.

South Park, the Comedy Central show that personifies ‘politically incorrect’, also works as a teen buzz case study. Before the show began airing, an irreverent holiday card, featuring some of the characters of the show, was passed along through email. The subject matter – Jesus vs. Santa Claus – was certainly edgy and controver-

sial. The shock value of *South Park* has made it the subject of conversation, and thus, a catalyst for buzz.

The third driver, ‘reality romanticised’, may seem unusual in pairing with our other themes. While we know teens do experience the ‘angst’ that we hear so much about, we also know that the teen years are filled with practical idealism – they want to change the world and challenge the assumptions of adults, although, to be clear, they don’t want to sacrifice too much to do it.

We looked at two marketers who are creating ways to make teens smile – which is something they’re willing to share with their friends. Nike

introduced its Presto running shoe in unusually creative ways. For example, it displayed the colourful shoes in an art gallery in Soho, creating a fashionable underside of a brand known for power and achievement. Their product also built-in buzz through something as mundane as its sizing – they come in small, medium and large.

Phillip Starck’s new line at Target was also introduced in an unusual way. Target created buzz among teens when the company changed the face of street signs in New York. In keeping with Starck’s design philosophy, these signs made everyday sidewalk commands endearing and rose-coloured (see Figure 2).

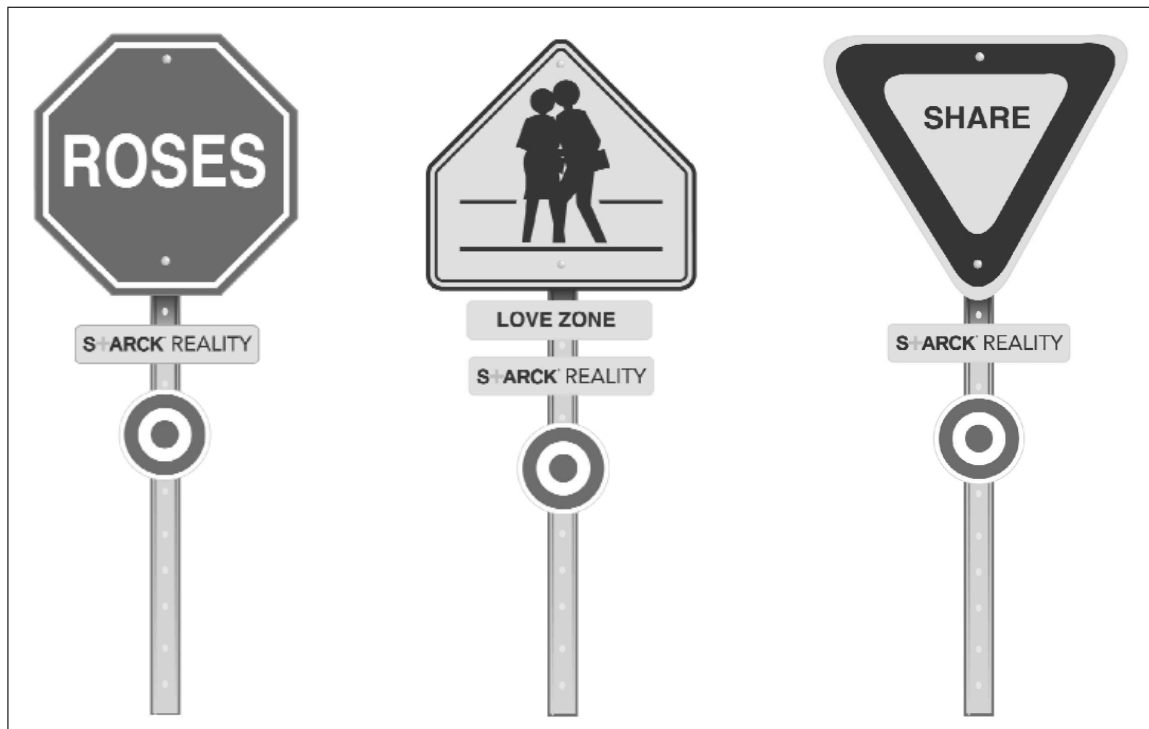


Figure 2 Phillip Starck’s street signs got teens ‘buzzing’ about Target

Your brand's alter ego

When we looked at the potential ways in which a marketer could develop these drivers for a brand, we realised that each of these required a risky proposition for marketers: developing an alter ego for your brand.

What is an alter ego? While your public persona is an undisputed truth, the most important attribute, and the equity of your brand, your alter ego is the edge of the acceptable. While this identification of multiple messages may belie marketing wisdom, we think it's an essential risk to take – or to evaluate – if you are committed to creating buzz around your teen brand.

By developing an alter ego for your brand, you can allow yourself and your agencies to take off the handcuffs – buzz requires that you take your brand to the edges of its identity. It may require turning your brand message inside-out – like Nike did when launching the Presto.

For brand managers launching a teen brand, we think you should become intimate with the 'dark side' of your brand. You may find power in these messages beyond their ability to be buzzable. For teens, brands that take risks feel like kindred spirits.

Puma really needed to infuse some life into their brand a few years ago, as competing with the Nikes and Adidas of this world wasn't building their business. They still wanted to stand for performance, but they also wanted to create a bold new statement – and show that they understand teens. Instead of joining the mainstream culture of sport, Puma decided to invade it. They rethought the category conventions, and decided to play in an area of white space – fashion over function. They also found new distribution channels to sell their products – underground retailers that teens love, like Urban Outfitters. Finally, Serena Williams' outfit spoke

a thousand words at the US Open. Her cat suit not only embodied Puma, but also showed teens and other Puma fans that this brand was willing to take risks.

Mountain Dew Code Red also became a brand surrounded by buzz. This brand's reputation spread like wildfire based on its 'bad' beginnings. Mountain Dew Code Red was the inspiration for a group of virus creators in Silicon Valley.

The brand also developed a more intentional alter ego. Unlike the high-energy, yet edgy, parent brand, Code Red was wrapped in grittiness and mystery from the beginning. The very name – Code Red – created talk value. They also sample in the exclusive enclaves of teen culture – like the lounges of the X Games. And finally, their advertising campaign had the feel of hidden cameras catching celebrities like Macy Gray on the authentic city streets where they first began breaking the rules – or redefining their games.

Getting buzz for your brand

First, we believe that you need to know exactly who you are before you begin to buzz. And know who you're not – if you can't imagine how your brand could ever adopt an alter ego, maybe your brand should not attempt to buzz.

Next, define your alter ego. Begin by thinking about how teens really see your brand – the good and the bad. Understand the flipside of your public persona and stretch your brand to its outer limits. Identify the influencers – the sub-group of your consumer set who are most likely to buzz about your brand.

Then create innovative ways of reaching them. Don't rely on existing 'buzz' tactics to carry your message. Then send your message, and most importantly, observe and analyse. Often we're not sure which messages will

work. By 'reading' your target you can not only begin the buzz but build on it. Finally, extend your buzz campaign and integrate it with the other elements of your media mix. Buzz can only last for so long – then you need to find new ways to stay connected to your consumer.

Before you buzz

Before you buzz, heed the following advice. First, develop clear expectations. Buzz does not build in a day and, by its nature, will not directly reach as many consumers as your traditional media buys. Buzz can be a great way to build a brand image and create a connection with your teen consumer, but it is not instantaneous. Second, know your target. Because buzz is a distinctive marketing method, and because it must fit into teens' culture, it requires a deep understanding of your target. Finally, make sure

How to buzz

- Know who you are; know who you're not
- Define your brand's alter ego
- Identify the influencers
- Innovate
- Seed the idea (and often the product)
- Observe and analyse
- Extend the campaign
- Integrate with awareness-generating media

you're looking at your brand through the eyes of your target, and not through the lens of adulthood. You may discover new opportunities that you never would have found – and you may avoid some big mistakes.

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