

# TOOLKIT FOR DEVELOPING A WORD OF MOUTH NETWORK

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## Introduction

For many years business and the field of marketing have realised the potential of 'Word of Mouth' as an effective form of advertising and have used it effectively. As an example of how prevalent this approach is in the world of marketing visit: <http://wordofmouth.org/>. Within the social science literature however WOM seems to have attracted rather more scant attention although the likes of Gluckman (1963) have identified how "gossip" acts as a glue that can bond groups together.

The purpose of this toolkit is to explore the potential of WOM for community engagement and participatory approaches to community development and research. To illustrate the potential of WOM a well-known case study from marketing literature concerns the experience of the Outback Steakhouse of Oxon Hill, Md, USA. When this chain of steakhouses decided to open up a new branch in an affluent black area, they brought in an African-American as a major investor.

The investor's knowledge of African-American culture enabled 'Outback' to use some astute public relations strategies. Knowing that barbershops and hair salons are communication centre in the black community, the investor invited barbers and beauticians to the restaurant for lunch. The hairstylists then spread the word. In its first year, the Outback in Oxon Hill was among the chain's top 10 performers.

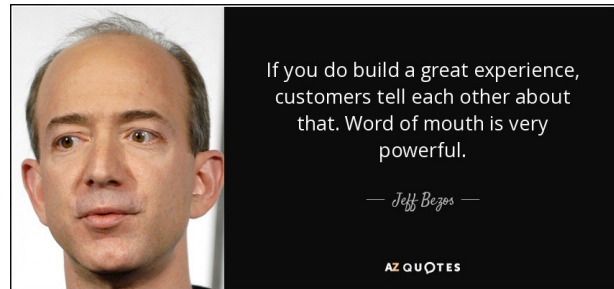
Research shows that 'word of mouth' can also be instrumental in changing people's lifestyles. For example:

Herndon (1992) examined how advertising and word of mouth had been used to familiarise and promote vasectomy to men. It was found that whilst television and advertising campaigns increased awareness, it was the testimony of a friend or relative who was satisfied with their vasectomy, which was most effective in overcoming the barriers that prevented men from accessing the service - fear of surgery, side effects, etc. Also Zlidar et al (2003) found that increases in formal education were not always necessary for levels of contraceptive use to increase. Word of Mouth and mass communication often made people aware of contraception and spread the small-family norm widely throughout a community.

Although there is strong evidence as to the effectiveness of WOM it is an approach that still is not widely adopted in the Voluntary or Public Sector for community engagement and development, and workers are still encouraged to produce costly posters / advertising materials often in various different languages as their only mode of advertising their activities, when research shows that much of this is ignored and may be inaccessible to those members of the community with literacy issues.

Even in these days when viral marketing, memes and fake news can make it seem that information, be it true or not can spread exponentially Word of Mouth has its advantages, as information received from a friend is more credible and people make choices on the advice of trusted individuals. A quote oft repeated in the marketing literature is: "Even those deaf to the bragging cries of the market place will listen to a friend" (Patti Lund) Also, within a community it is often faster than advertising, direct mail, and even the internet, because it can spread like wildfire and can reach those who are on the other side of the digital divide. Particularly with the advent of Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms although this does not negate the significance of peer to peer word of mouth such platforms allow these networks to be augmented and become a lot more far reaching.

Although WOM has great potential for spreading information it can often lead to feelings of uncertainty among professionals as the information is more out of their control than traditionally produced platforms. While there is an element of truth to this all information after it leaves its source is open to interpretation and by engaging in WOM networks there is more opportunity to moderate any such interpretation. It is hoped this Toolkit will help and encourage project workers to develop 'Word of Mouth' networks in their communities and therefore realise its potential.



## 1. Identify the Communication Centres of your community

Much of the information communicated in communities is done face to face and informally ('gossiping'). Therefore, we need to be aware of the Communication Centres of our communities, e.g.

- Schools - parents evening, school gates, playground, staffroom
- Communities First Office
- Pubs/Social Club
- Hairdressers
- GP Surgeries/Clinics/Local Hospital
- Taxis
- Garages
- Sports Grounds/Sports Clubs/Leisure Centres
- Places of Worship
- Communities Centres/Healthy Living Centres/Welfare Halls/Youth Clubs
- Library/Job Centre/Police Station/Post Office/Estate Agent/CAB
- Shops/cafes
- Public Transport/Community Car/Bus Stop
- Notice Boards
- Media - Radio, local papers, local magazine
- Old age groups/brownies/cubs & scouts
- Offices/Local Factories
- Wherever people 'hang out' (for young people this can include parks, street corners, benches etc.)

When thinking about the communication centres we need to be innovative, and remember that the centres used may differ according to the message, and the community.

## 2. Be aware of what/how information is circulated

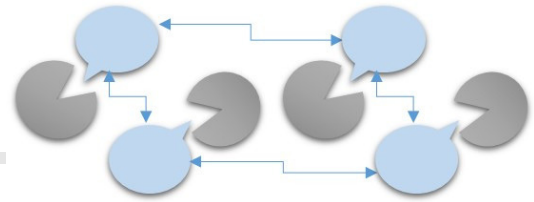
- Written information is used most often, but although easier to control, it rarely gets read.
- The press are more inclined to print bad news than good, however you can combat this by building a good relationship with reporters. It may be useful to nominate/appoint a local press officer, to take responsibility for all local publicity.
- Whilst good news spreads quickly, bad news spreads faster. Studies from the field of marketing have shown that a satisfied customer is likely to tell approximately three people, while a dissatisfied customer is likely to tell approximately eleven.
- Wrong/malicious information will harm projects/activities - this needs to be challenged/corrected immediately.
- People with strong personalities will tend to spread information - these people need to be recruited and used to spread positive information (Keep potential enemies close!).
- Anger generates speech - harness this and use it to benefit projects/activities

## 3. Identify key people/organisations

these can be local workers or ordinary members of the public who regularly use the 'communication centres' and can be trusted to pass on the correct message. E.g. Receptionists, GP's, Midwives, Health Visitors, Social Workers, Physiotherapists, Shopkeepers, Youth Workers, Hairdressers, Teachers, Pupils (class reps, school council), Local Historians, Town/Community Council, Cleaner, Member of Local Group, 'Community Champion', Nominated Person from Local Business/Factory. **NB The person in charge is not always the best person to pass on information, as often they do not have time.**

## 4. Nominate organisation / individual to co-ordinate / disseminate information

and take action to ensure every one uses this route e.g. refuse to circulate their information as this will avoid duplication and annoyance by information overload.



## 5. Provide training for key people

E.g. How to present message for use by information co-ordinator, desk top publishing, writing a press release, dangers of 'bad' information - 'Chinese whispers'.

## 6. Provide key workers/champions with necessary information -

- **Keep it short.** If the worker does not have the opportunity to display a poster they may not see it as relevant to them and therefore not read it, so provide an abstract.
- **Up to date** - if out of date people will soon stop reading it!
- **Relevant** - Get to know the interests of the people/groups in your network and only send information relevant to them.

## 7. Give incentives for people to 'spread the word'

- Opportunity to give as well as receive information
- Publicity for their organisation
- A social network/opportunity for friendship
- Invites to functions/events - made to feel important
- Reductions for groups, or free entry if introduce X number of friends

## 8. Have personal contact

whilst letters and emails are quicker, and less time consuming, personal contact is an essential element of 'word of mouth' and time spent maintaining/developing relationships and is an investment that will pay 'dividends'.

- Spend time getting to know your community - this will not only help you become a familiar face, but will also prevent wastage on projects that communities don't want, and make you aware of the culture and idiosyncrasies of the community.
- Attend community events not set up by your self.
- Support local traders e.g. hairdressers, shops, pubs etc. and use the opportunity to talk about your projects/activities.
- Have a 'local' person fronting any events/activities or have personal contact with your audience before hand -People can be afraid of attending a class/activity/venue for the first time, they feel more at ease if they see a familiar face they can approach when entering.

## 9. One size does not fit all

People/communities are individual and their needs and responses will differ. Also different age groups will need different approaches.

## 10. Be aware of the underlying messages you are sending

If you're a health project and you provide burgers and chips at an event, you're telling your clients that it's OK!

### References

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