



The Medium Shapes the Message: The Surprising Negative Spin of Close Friends' Word-of-Mouth

David Dubois

■■■■■

KEYWORDS

*Word-of-Mouth, WOM,
Friends, Social Media, Buzz*

•

THE AUTHOR

David Dubois
Assistant Professor of Marketing,
INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France
david.dubois@insead.edu

■■■■■

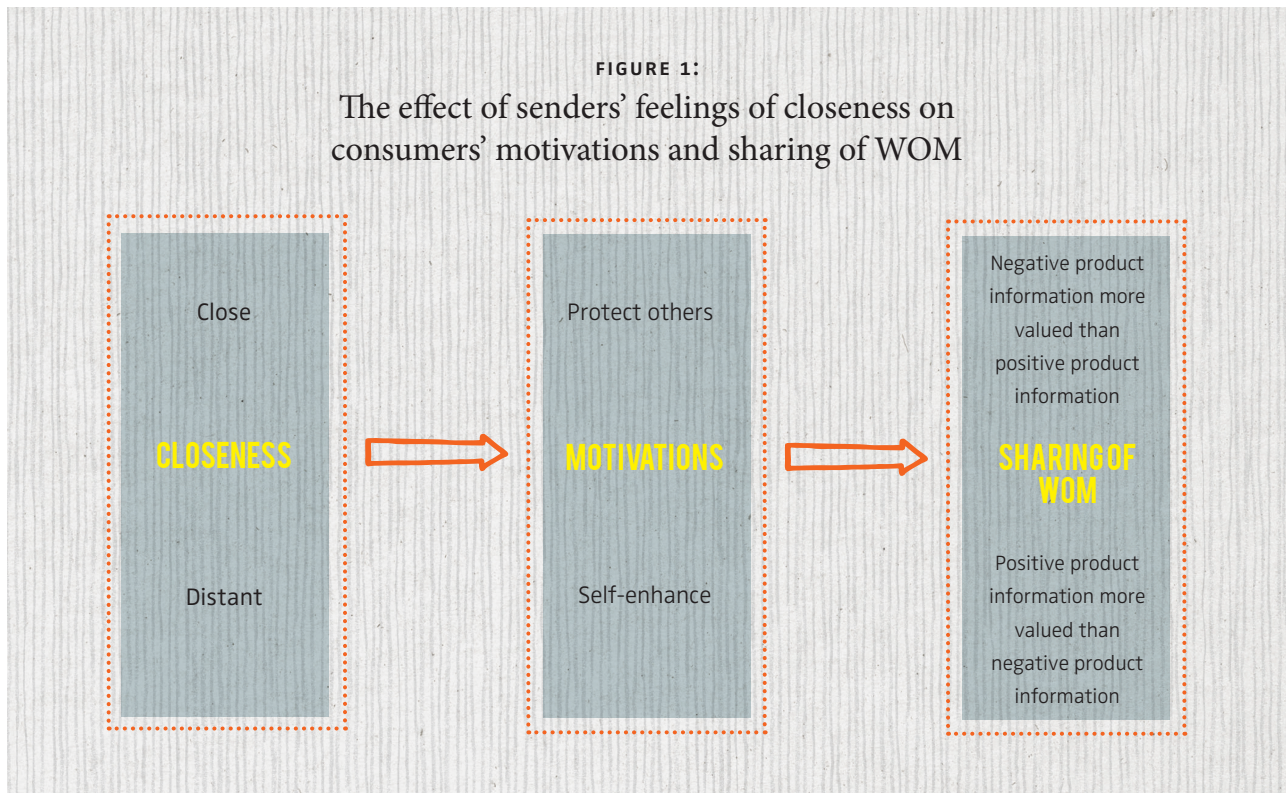
Relying on friends and peers rather than experts

/// Consumers increasingly rely on their digital social networks – friends, colleagues and mere acquaintances – to make decisions about which products or services to buy or which candidate to vote for. They no longer trust traditional forms of advertising such as television or mass media and are placing increasing trust in the experience of other people, often readily available online. Consumers seem to trust and rely on word-of-mouth (WOM) or buzz in this manner even when they don't know the posters personally or when these individuals share their experience anonymously, as is often the case with, for example, online travel agencies such as Booking.com.

The WOM effect is substantial ///

On average, a 7 % increase in favorable WOM messages can increase a company's revenues by as much as 1 %. Similarly, a recent study in the hotel industry conducted in Europe showed that an increase of 10 points of a hotel's e-reputation score on TripAdvisor translated into a 10 % increase in bookings at that hotel. Conversely, an increase of 1,000 word-of-mouth complaints can cost the airline industry an accumulated loss of as much as \$8.1 billion over 20 months. Therefore, being able to successfully spread positive, and limit negative, word-of-mouth about one's products and services has become an essential skill.

Many social media handbooks recommend targeting customers' close connections and encouraging consumers to spread the word about their products and services among friends. This perspective assumes that one's friends are disposed to speak favorably about products and services. But is this always the case? Not really!



The closeness shapes the message /// It turns out that it matters how close WOM senders feel towards WOM recipients. This, in turn, influences the extent to which they push more positive or more negative information. The feelings of closeness that WOM senders experience toward their recipients determine what they share. On the one hand, feeling close to a recipient instills the need to protect the recipient. The WOM sender wants to avoid the recipient having a bad experience. Therefore, communicating negative information, which highlights potential negative outcomes or attributes of a product, becomes valued and thus more likely to be shared among close friends. On the other hand, feeling distant from a recipient instills the need to self-enhance and impress. Communicating positive information, which is more likely to be appreciated and to shed a positive light on the WOM sender, becomes valued and thus more likely to be shared among mere acquaintances (see Figure 1). In one study, we asked people to share a message on LinkedIn to a person of their choice. We also counted the number of overlapping connections a sender had with each

message recipient. Confirming our intuition, the greater the overlap between a WOM sender and a WOM recipient, the more negative people tended to be in their message.

The platform effect: LinkedIn versus Facebook /// A similar effect can be observed across different platforms: For instance, people tend to use Facebook more to foster and

»
The feelings of closeness that WOM senders experience toward their recipients determine what they share.
«

maintain personal connections, while they use LinkedIn for professional connections. Without consumers being aware of it, the platform itself changes the very reason why they share. Sharing with someone on Facebook can increase feelings of proximity compared to sharing with the same person on the more professional and less personal platform LinkedIn – at least for specific consumer segments. In another study, we asked millennials to send a short note featuring the pros and cons of a camera with an acquaintance on Facebook and on LinkedIn. Looking at what they wrote in their reviews revealed that millennials included more cons than pros when sharing on Facebook but more pros than cons on LinkedIn – confirming that the medium shapes the message.

When is this distortion more likely to take place?

/// This happens when people talk about new and exciting products, it turns out. Talking about a new product can give

consumers the opportunity to build their image because the new features or attributes of that product can make them look more smart and in the know. At the same time, talking about a new product can give consumers good grounds to warn others because new products are typically seen as more risky. A third study confirmed this theory. We had a group of people share news about a new product or a well-established product on Facebook and on LinkedIn. And indeed, spreading news about a new product yielded both more positive chatter with LinkedIn connections but more negative chatter with Facebook friends. However, these differences disappeared when people talked about the well-established product. Highlighting the product's novelty had amplified the effects of relationship strength, and this prompted participants to share more positive information with distant connections but more negative information with those close to them (see Figure 2).

{Box 1}

WHICH FACTORS FAVOR POSITIVE WOM?

To explore the nature of WOM, my colleagues Andrea Bonezzi from NYU Stern and Matteo De Angelis from LUISS Business School and I conducted a series of studies investigating when and why consumers share positive or negative product or service information.

In a wide range of contexts, including restaurants, cameras and hotels, consumers actually focused more on either the pros or the cons of an option, depending on the platform they used and on whether they were communicating with friends or mere acquaintances. Also, the type of product made a difference. News on new products is spread differently than on well-established products.

The different focus in the message stems from different motives the WOM senders pursue – mostly unconsciously: While they want to protect close friends from unpleasant experiences, their prior objective vis-à-vis loose acquaintances is making a good and savvy impression. Consequently, positive information tends to spread more easily across weakly tied connections, while negative word-of-mouth tends to spread among close ties, which makes them potentially dangerous to build on for marketing executives.



THINK ABOUT IT



FIGURE 2:
The effect of closeness is stronger for innovative products

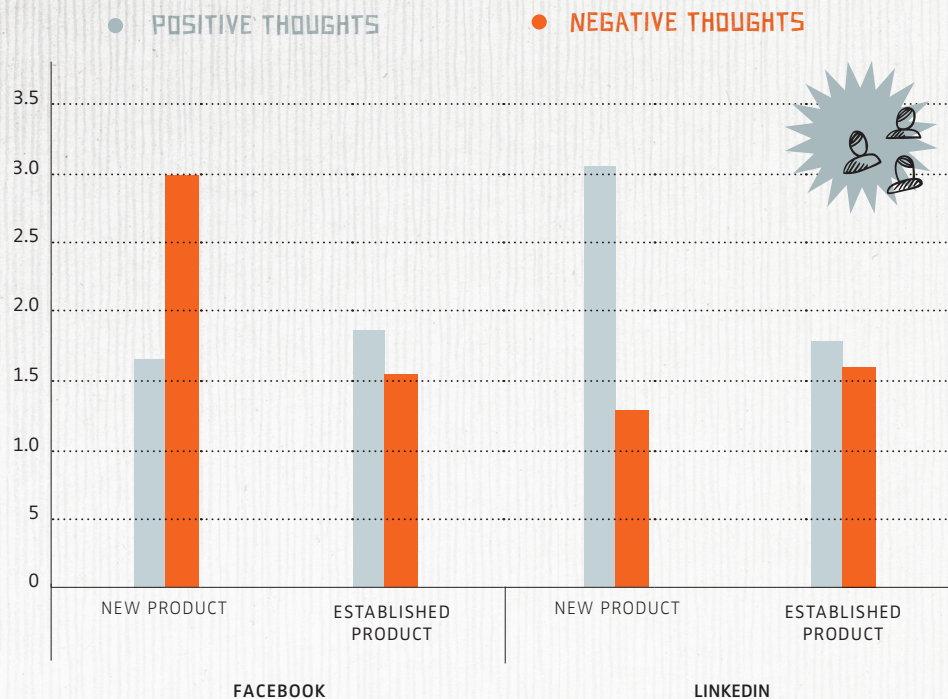


Figure adapted from Dubois et al. 2016

How to encourage positive buzz /// The insights of our research imply several recommendations for marketers in charge of designing their brands' social media or WOM campaigns.

> **Monitor the closeness of community members** /// Social media platforms and channel formats, like messengers, social networks, blogs, etc. can help managers assess the extent to which their community is tightly connected. A lot of information and metrics are instantly available. A pic-

ture, the number of overlapping connections with someone or a shared event can be very relevant to estimate consumers' closeness and, as a result, what these consumers are likely to share online.

> **Select the right platform for WOM campaigns** /// Overall, the type of platform on which the organization shares the information seems instrumental in shaping WOM propagation. LinkedIn or other platforms that typically focus on looser connections may be a better bet for starting a

campaign as self-enhancement motives tend to be higher. Looking at the size of an audience can also be helpful. In small communities, consumers are likely to feel more intimate, and therefore the risk that they will share more negative information about a product is higher.

- > **Frame the communication context to favor positive WOM** /// Digital managers should also pay attention to how they encourage consumers to produce content about their products and services. At a time when more than 80 % of reviews on Amazon are incentivized, a savvy marketer might decide to encourage the sharing of positive word-of-mouth messages by adjusting the context of their communication. This could mean displaying a photo of a potential recipient to highlight dissimilarities between the sender and the recipient and hence reducing a feeling of closeness.
- > **Close friends might not be a digital marketer's best bet** /// Finally, our research speaks to the potential dangers of advising a company to leverage customers' friends to spread ideas or products. This might not be the most effective way to build positive momentum; in fact, in some contexts, it might just do the opposite.

1.



FURTHER READING

Dubois, David; Bonezzi, Andrea; De Angelis, Matteo (2016):

“Sharing with Friends Versus Strangers: How Interpersonal Closeness Influences Word-of-Mouth Valence,”
Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 53 (5), pp. 712 – 727.

Dubois, David; Rucker, Derek D; Tormala, Zakary L. (2011):

“From Rumors to Facts, and Facts to Rumors: The Role of Certainty Decay in Consumer Communications,”
Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 48 (6), pp. 1020 – 32.

Cheung, Man Yee; Luo, Chuan; Sia, Choon Ling; Chen, Huaping (2009):

“Credibility of Electronic Word-of-Mouth: Informational and Normative Determinants of On-line Consumer Recommendations,” International Journal of Electronic Commerce, Vol. 13(4), pp. 9 – 38.

De Angelis, Matteo; Bonezzi, Andrea; Peluso, Alessandro; Rucker, Derek D.; Costabile, Michele (2012):

“On Braggarts and Gossips: A Self-Enhancement Account of Word-of-Mouth Generation and Transmission,”
Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 49 (4), pp 551 – 63.

http://www.customerdelight.nu/content/04-artikelen/06-artikel-f/advocacydrivesgrowth_5-9-05.pdf
