



# Lost in Translation: The Social Shaping of Marketing Messaging

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Word of mouth (WOM) is a natural occurring phenomenon that has always been important in purchasing decisions. Now, with the Internet's reach and accessibility, WOM has gained a completely new dimension and so have marketers' opportunities to take advantage of it.

The classic approach for word of mouth marketing (WOMM) was to identify and target potential "opinion leaders". Marketers would be able to work through "friends who recommend a tried and trusted product" rather than "a salesman interested in his commission only". The opinion leader was assumed to transmit marketing messages more or less faithfully, without substantially altering them. As such, it was expected that marketing messages would spread through the market intact.

**Consumers are no simple multipliers, but coproducers of meaning** /// But more recent findings from research on consumer communities shows that the information flow of WOMM is not as unidirectional and straight as previously assumed. Rather, consumers are active coproducers of value and meaning. They translate and transform marketing meanings. WOM resulting from marketing communications can be everything from euphoric to resistant, and the discourse evolving around a product seeding has a strong impact on how this product is perceived. On the surface, WOMM may seem similar to public relations or other forms of paid promotion, but it is injected into a much more complex social environment, allowing and even encouraging new meaning. Figure 1 shows the processes occurring in coproducing consumer-networked narratives. However, even this is a vast oversimplification. The cultural environment is like a teeming sea full of different social forms and varieties. Launching a brand message into this environment is often akin to launching a message in a bottle out to sea.

## SEEDING PRODUCTS TO BLOGGERS

Our study focuses on a blog-based campaign in six North American cities. The campaign was designed to promote a new camera-equipped mobile phone for a global technology manufacturer. The actual product was seeded to 90 influential bloggers who were encouraged (but not obliged) to talk about the phone on their blogs. Of that group, 84 % did mention the phone in their blog, and the company was confident with its success as follow-up surveys showed that substantial sales were triggered by the bloggers' recommendations. In a netnographic study, we analyzed in depth how the messages unfolded and which cultural processes could be observed. The qualitative ground-up data analysis showed that bloggers not only communicated the marketing message, they also dealt with specific cultural tensions to convert it into socially relevant and desirable information.

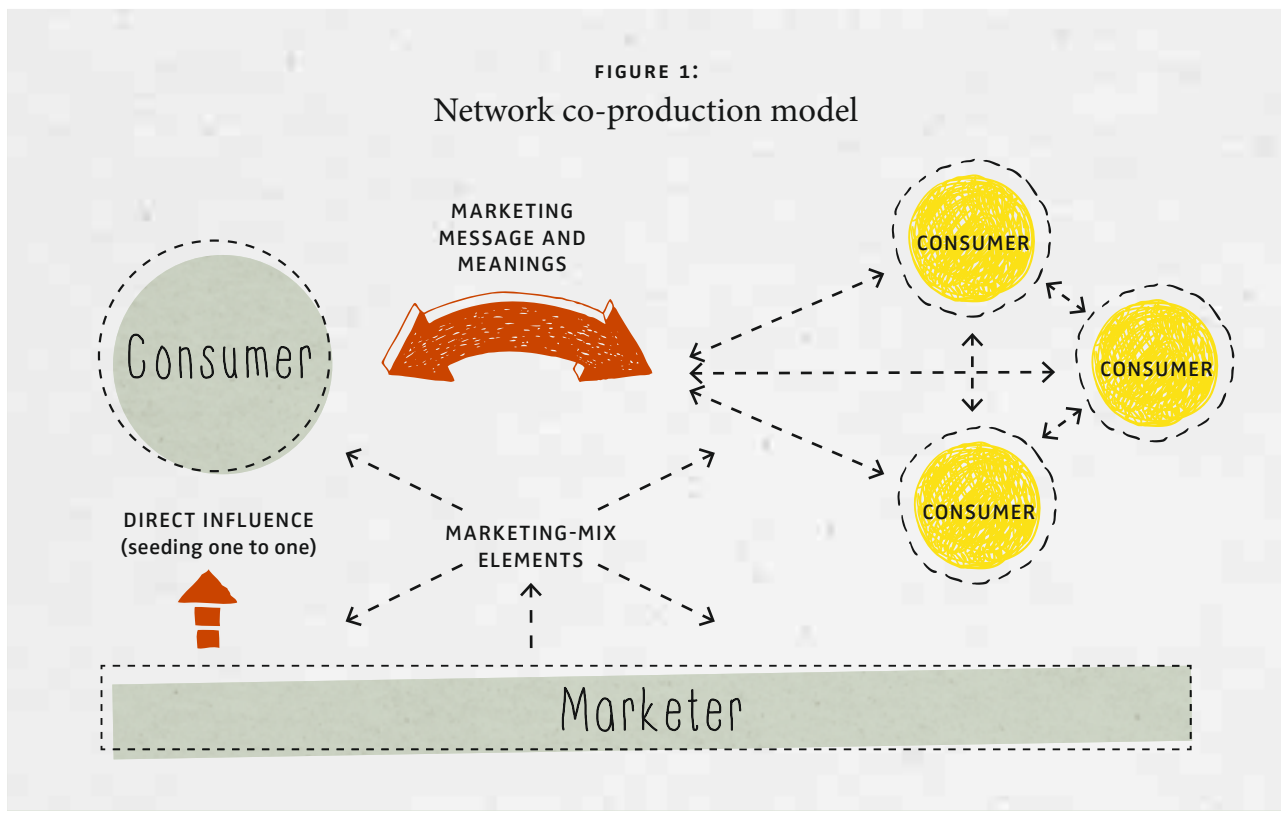


For marketers it is very relevant to assess how the coproduction of meaning evolves. This research therefore aims at detecting communication patterns to explain mechanisms surrounding the seeding of a WOMM campaign.

**Social brand engagement creates tension** /// Successfully introducing a commercial product into a consumer's social network creates tension because social relationships are trusted, while commercial ones may not be. Are you selling out your friends and family? Are you speaking as my trusted friend? Or as a paid or otherwise compensated advertiser?

This is the question all social media actors must be prepared to answer when they bring the brand “into bed” with their social media or other relationships. Our research revealed the four careful strategies these social brand marketers use to resolve the tension between being a trustworthy opinion leader and a commercial marketer (Figure 2, page 26).

- > First, a *strategy* of “**product evaluation**” deals with cultural anxiety by avoiding it; the WOMM campaign is hardly mentioned, and attention is drawn directly to the product. Social media posters demonstrate the trustworthiness of their information and opinions. Yet, in ignoring the moral tension inherent in acting as a marketer, the evaluative strategy can backfire. The community questions why the blogger would conceal his participation and some feel betrayed. The apparent incongruity of a blogger benefiting at the individual level while professing a communal orientation can result in explicit hostility.
- > Second, there is the “**campaign embracing**” strategy. It also keeps the cultural anxiety implicit, but here the consumer-marketer mentions the WOMM campaign and their participation in it, using terms of enthusiastic acceptance. Bloggers offer a bold, self-interested justification for their dual role as consumer and marketer. They adopt the professional language and terms of marketing and also often include requests for further opportunities to promote other products. Communal responses to this strategy in the study were polarized. Some found the honesty and self-interest refreshing, particularly when it fit well with the existing style and norms. However, there were also many unfavorable responses. In these cases, the trustworthiness of the communicator was often called into question.
- > Third, we found an “**endorsement**” strategy. In this approach, the consumer-marketers expressed and acknowledged the commercial-communal tension by disclosing the WOMM campaign and their participation in it. They signaled awareness of marketers' intentions but attempted to discharge community concerns about the trustworthiness of the given information. Often they argued for their own self-interest and asked for the assistance, support, and understanding of their audience. These communicators also adopted a professionalized promotional language and signaled a willingness to favor other marketing requests. In our data, this type of strategy did not seem to arouse hostility when bloggers were connected emotionally with community members. In other blogs, such appeals were received much less successfully.

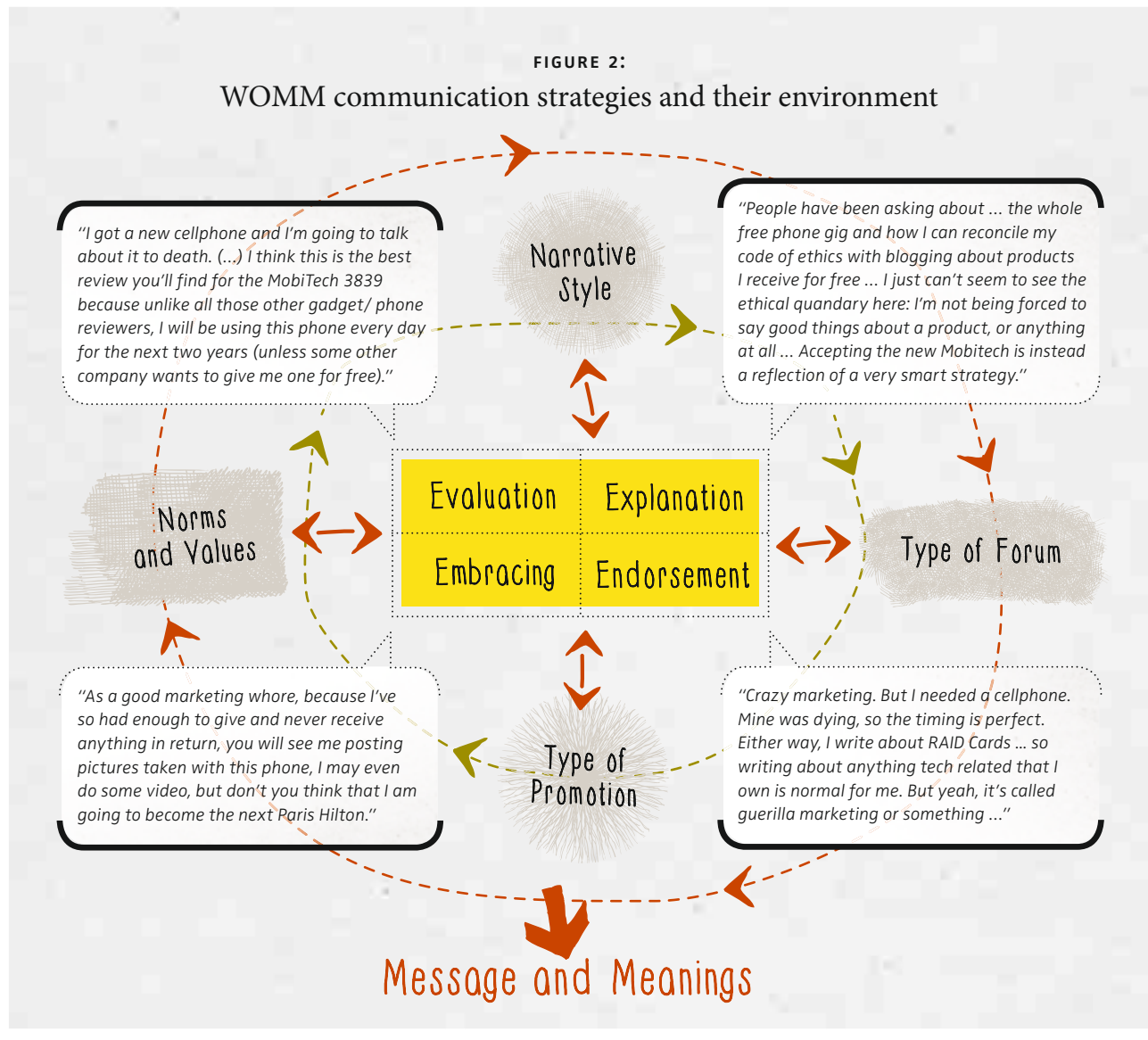


> The fourth WOMM communications *strategy of “participation explanation”* is the most open one. Bloggers openly disclose the presence of the WOMM campaign and analyze the various communal impacts of participation in it. They explicitly discuss the potential conflict of interest associated with WOMM, but they do so while asserting the importance and interests of their communities in a manner that affirms their own value to the community as a safe or preferred source of information. They present the WOMM campaign in a way that has the potential to even strengthen the communal ties. In instances of this strategy during the research period, community members were either positive or neutral regarding the WOMM campaign.

#### The art of strategically aligning WOMM with social brand

/// Deciding on the appropriate strategy depends on the individual characteristics of the social media posters, their communication style, the established rules of communication within the forum, and the characteristics of the campaign, product, and brand.

Each forum has its own *norms* of communication. Such implicit rules depend on factors like the average age of its members and their interests, lifestyles, or social class. In situations where values and norms are favorable toward the marketplace – the way they are in many brand communities, for instance – embracing and endorsing strategies are viewed favorably. Audiences expect these narratives and accept them willingly. Alternatively, communities that tend to resist profit motives and the logics of the marketplace – such as those that are rather secretive, personable, local, and “caring and sharing” – resist the blatant commercialism and self-promotion of an embracing strategy. These communities respond much more favorably to explicit explanation.



The *type of social media site* also shapes the response to WOMM. For example, consumers have grown to expect and perhaps even welcome certain kinds of commercial promotions on Facebook or Twitter, but there are still social boundaries that can be breached. When messages seem out of place or insincere – such as when Facebook appropriated people’s names and photos and used them on advertisements (for which they later were sued) – people tend to resist and mistrust the communication. Alternatively, when communications are already more commercial, as with Pinterest, LinkedIn, or Twitter, audiences can respond quite well to any of the strategies, especially an evaluative or openly embracing one.

One of the key aspects to consider is the individual consumer’s own *narrative style*. Who is the person engaging in this act of social brand engagement? What is their personal brand? What are they trying to achieve? Tweeters, bloggers, Pinterest-posters and other personally branded consumers may enact archetypical characters like the citizen journalist, the tell-it-like-it-is mother, the satirical exhibitionist, the making-ends-meet professional and so on in their efforts to engage other consumers.

Finally, *the promotional characteristics of the product, the brand, and the entire 360-degree brand marketing campaign* impact the process of message transmission as well. Strategies differ between types of products or brands as well as objectives. Technology and other high-involvement products tend to naturally inspire more evaluation, while fashion and entertainment products result in more embracing narratives (as in the article on megaphone effects detailed by McQuarrie et al on page 16). Hard-sell offers result in more explanation and evaluation, while soft-sell campaigns, such as funny, viral or embedded advertising created to be spread rapidly among large numbers, inspire endorsing or embracing narratives (if any).

**Social brand engagement success factors** /// It is essential to realize that social brand engagement is not about the amplification or accurate spread of a marketing message. It is not about the spread of so-called “positive” brand messages or recommendations. Social brand engagement is a genuine and natural-seeming interconnection between brand mentions and consumer-to-consumer social experiences. Therefore simply observing reach and valence of product mentions is too short-sighted. To effectively attain social brand engagement, promotions need to seem authentic and congruent with people, media, other content and the offline or online context. A deep analysis of what is going on in the prospective environment of a message to be seeded is a precondition for the optimal design of a WOMM campaign and the accurate interpretation of its success. Managers should therefore consider the following recommendations for their WOMM campaigns:

- > **Explore the nature of potential social branding candidates to optimize campaigns** /// Being able to understand and classify personal brand characteristics, styles, preferred communication modes and types of forum as well as knowing the ropes of the different social media sites and their communities: all of these things are essential for wise social brand managers. Managers should also attune the type of social branding effort to the characteristics of the WOM environment. Click-through, e-commerce and other short-term, buy-this-now offers lend themselves to strategies of explanation and evaluation, while embracing and endorsing narratives would be congruent with image-driven, soft-sell, long-term brand-building campaigns.
- > **Apply a refined set of success measures** /// Don't over-emphasize positive mentions, likes, and recommendations. Our research shows that negative information is often necessary and useful in the social branding process to negotiate cultural tension and to enhance consumer-to-consumer trust and credibility. Famous cases of negative

social media mentions, such as United Breaks Guitars and the humorous McDonald's McStories fiasco, have not led to any discernible damage to the brand or erosion of market share. One conclusion might therefore be to predict success by the strict volume of online WOM mentions, rather than their positive or negative valence. However, the narrative strategies of evaluation, embracing, endorsement and explanation depict a multidimensional storytelling process. Not all mentions are created equal, and the cultural side of this process and its elements require a more sophisticated assessment of the narrative outputs of these campaigns. Forward-looking marketers are therefore already using and applying criteria like social brand engagement, types of consumer-brand value communicated, narrative forms of persuasion, and interaction roles and styles in addition to simply measuring raw impressions.

- > **Use netnography to sharpen managerial awareness and engagement** /// There is also an opportunity for marketing managers to focus on the valuable qualitative insights that emerge from their own managerial engagement with social branding processes. All forms of social media can be considered to be (semi)permanent archives of consumer feedback. Using a process of manager-oriented “operational netnography”, managers can and should experience the conversational quality and content of these interactions for deeper insights into their brand, their product experience and even their marketing programs. Social branding should be viewed as an opportunity for marketing managers to gain familiarity with more recent marketing phenomena such as participatory consumer culture, creative consumer communities, open-source branding, natural brand communities and the innovation communities that Henry Jenkins and Johann Füller write about in this issue (see articles on pages 34 and 40). Netnography, social branding, and WOMM are important and subtle new tools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century marketing manager's toolkit. They are changing the way marketing is being conducted.

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