Word of Mouth Reconsidered: Facts, Fallacies, and Future Directions

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Abstract

Word of mouth (WOM) is the focus of growing interest among marketing practitioners and consumers; however, the promises of WOM marketing are often oversold, and assertions about WOM are sometimes more informed by common wisdom and trade publications than by peer-reviewed, empirical research. We survey the current state of knowledge regarding WOM antecedents, valence, impact, and channels in an effort to separate WOM facts from fallacies. We also report the results of two questionnaire studies intended to investigate beliefs about WOM among business students and professionals. The paper concludes with a brief consideration of emerging realities about WOM research and practice resulting from new technologies and transmission channels.

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Overview

In recent years, word of mouth (WOM) has become the focus of growing interest among marketing practitioners and consumers. Technological developments have facilitated the means by which people connect to each other, bringing to the fore the influence of online channels for the transmission of interpersonal communication. However, as the term "word of mouth" has entered widespread parlance, various assertions about its nature, dynamics, antecedents, and consequences have at times been misstated and the promises of WOM marketing oversold.

This paper reconsiders common beliefs about the WOM process in an effort to separate facts from fallacies, and considers how WOM understanding must change in light of evolving channels of WOM transmission. Through a consideration of the extant literature, we evaluate common assumptions about the nature and dynamics of WOM, including (1) the frequency and drivers of offline and eWOM, (2) the relative frequency of positive word of mouth (PWOM) and negative WOM (NWOM); and (3) the relative impact of PWOM and NWOM on consumer choice. We then presage some future directions relating to WOM marketing (WOMM).

The Nature of WOM

Part and parcel of human discourse for as long as people have engaged in conversation, WOM is the driving force underlying consumer sharing and thus represents a relevant delivery mechanism for marketing information and advice. Defined by the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) as the act of a consumer creating and/or distributing marketing-relevant information to another consumer, WOM may occur online or offline; may pertain to ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services (or their sellers); and may be positive (PWOM; "you should try that B&B, the owners couldn't do enough for us"), negative (NWOM; "don't go to that new pizzeria, the food is horrible"), or neutral ("I heard that the local supermarket is now offering home delivery"). WOM is commonly viewed as a post-purchase behavior that is perceived by receivers and communicators as non-commercial in nature (Goyette et al., 2010).

WOM represents a primary source of information for consumer buying decisions (e.g., Mangold et al., 1999), and can shape consumer expectations (Anderson & Salisbury, 2003), pre-usage attitudes (Herr et al., 1991), and post-usage perceptions of a product or service (Bone, 1995). The power of WOM is based on the accessibility, credibility, and trustworthiness of the information source. Perceived objectivity underlies the greater effectiveness of WOM communication; for example, information from an online discussion is considered as more credible, relevant, emphatic, and interesting than marketer-generated information (e.g., Bickart & Schindler, 2001).

Without denying its potential impact in the marketplace, where informal recommendations can have a more significant influence on brand image and purchasing behavior than formal marketing communications, hyperbole about the power of WOM abounds. WOM has been described as "the most important marketing element that exists" (Alsop, 1984), "more powerful than all of the other marketing methods put together" (Silverman, 2001), "the greatest of all brand messages" (Dobele

& Ward, 2003), "the only kind of persuasion that most of us respond to anymore" (Gladwell, 2000), and "the ultimate test of the customer relationship" (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997). Whether or not the hype exceeds the true promise of WOM marketing remains to be seen; however, an examination of the extant research reveals that in some circumstances, WOM can have less of an influence on consumers than more traditional forms of marketing communication (e.g., Hlavinka & Sullivan, 2011), and that certain types of WOM have more of an impact than others (e.g., Chen et al., 2011; Sundaram & Webster, 1999). Thus, the assumption that WOM efforts will always have their intended effects or that consumers will respond accordingly is both misguided and oversimplified. Proponents of marketing approaches intended to encourage WOM may ignore or misread the scientific evidence and fail to consider the limitations of a strategy, applicability to other business sectors or geographical regions, or future behavioral and attitudinal trends.

Separating WOM Facts and Fallacies

A comprehensive review of the research literature reveals that in contrast to how WOM is often described, (a) satisfaction/dissatisfaction accounts for a relatively small proportion of WOM, (b) PWOM is more common than NWOM, (c) NWOM may or may not have a greater impact than PWOM, and (d) personal, offline WOM (pWOM) is more prevalent and influential than eWOM.

To ascertain the extent to which people hold beliefs that are in line with popular conceptions or are more grounded in empirical research and professional experience, we conducted two studies, the first of which considered the beliefs of business students (N=211) and professionals (N=207), and the second focused on advanced management students' (N=115) beliefs about pWOM and eWOM. Questionnaire items pertained in part to the antecedents of WOM, PWOM versus NWOM, WOM impact, and the relative frequency and power of pWOM and eWOM. (Means given below are based on a Likert scales ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).

Drivers of WOM. Misunderstandings about WOM often revolve around the antecedents that compel people to transmit information or advice. It often is assumed that the typical catalyst of WOM is customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction (cf. East et al., 2008). In part, this assumption is derived from research showing higher frequencies of WOM when satisfaction or dissatisfaction are at their highest levels (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Swan & Oliver, 1989). Yet, when the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the communicator and receiver are combined, the total only accounts for a small percentage of overall WOM. A variety of social and ego-related motivations and opportunities may serve as drivers of WOM in addition to satisfaction level, including "felt need" of the recipient (stimulated by a request for information) and "coincidental communication" (WOM arising out of a conversation) (e.g., Berger & Schwartz, 2011; Cheung & Lee, 2012; East et al., 2007). Customer satisfaction/ dissatisfaction may serve as an antecedent for the production of WOM, but appears to be less important than other factors in prompting informal consumer conversations.

Results of our questionnaire studies pertaining to the key drivers of WOM strongly suggest that both business students and professionals consider satisfaction and dissatisfaction as giving rise to a majority of WOM instances. Study 1 revealed a relatively high degree of agreement with the belief that WOM is *always* related to the satisfaction/dissatisfaction of the person who transmits it ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.08$), with 61.3% of respondents having agreed with that belief) as opposed to 27.3% who disagreed with it. A significantly high percentage of participants (65.2%) in Study 2

identified satisfaction/dissatisfaction as the factor most likely to cause WOM, $\chi^2 = 158$ ($p < .001$, $df = 4$), with an average of 60.7% of all WOM instances attributed to that factor.

Relative Frequency of PWOM and NWOM. Another common assertion in the literature is that the incidence of NWOM far exceeds that of PWOM. For example, in his trade book on WOM marketing, Silverman (2001, p. 134) asserted that "Most word of mouth, studies have shown, is negative." However, across 15 studies, East et al. (2007) reported a greater incidence of PWOM than NWOM, with an average ratio of 3:1, and categories with high levels of NWOM also tended to have high levels of PWOM. These findings are consistent with several independent studies on volume of positive and negative advice across various product categories (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Naylor & Kleiser, 2000). Keller Fay Group's "TalkTrack" methodology revealed a 6:1 ratio in favor of PWOM in brand-related discussions (Siegel, 2006). Oetting et al. (2010) reported that 89% of more than 20,000 European consumers surveyed recalled positive instances of WOM as opposed to negative instances, demonstrating that contrary to common belief, PWOM is more memorable than NWOM. PWOM may be more common than NWOM because most products are satisfactory for consumers and a greater percentage of WOM instances is likely to concern the consumer's main brand (e.g., Mittal & Lassar, 1998; East et al., 2007).

Our questionnaire findings revealed that responses for both samples in Study 1 were normally distributed regarding WOM valence ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.07$). However, nearly half (45.2%) of the respondents agreed that NWOM is more common than PWOM, compared with 30.6% who disagreed. Although there was moderate belief in the assumption that NWOM is more prevalent than PWOM, a majority of respondents (79.2%) agreed that much discussion about marketplace offerings pertains to currently-owned brands, and that WOM about those brands is more likely to be positive than negative. Professionals were less likely than student participants to believe that most WOM is associated with non-owned brands, $t = 2.16$ ($df = 415$, $p < .05$).

Relative Impact of PWOM and NWOM. Another widely-held belief about WOM is that NWOM from dissatisfied customers has a significantly stronger effect on recipients than PWOM received from satisfied customers. Assael's (1995, p. 639) assertion that "negative word of mouth tends to be more powerful than positive information" is typical of this belief. There does appear to be some support for this claim; however, the results are anything but clear-cut. In perhaps the most extensive analysis to date, using various measures and covering a large number of categories, East et al. (2008, p. 215) found that for familiar brands, "the impact of PWOM is generally greater than NWOM" on brand purchase probability (as opposed to brand attitude). Overall, the issue of the relative impact of PWOM and NWOM on consumer behavior involves a variety of mediating factors (e.g., Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004). In this light, the unqualified assumption that NWOM has greater impact than PWOM cannot be supported.

Our results (Study 1) revealed a high level of agreement with the relative impact assumption ($M = 3.98$, $SD = .98$), with 76.3% of respondents agreeing that NWOM has a greater impact (including 23.7% strongly agreeing), as opposed to 13.5% indicating disagreement. Nonetheless, when asked to consider the impact of the last instance of received WOM that affected their brand choice, the results presented a different picture. A large majority of respondents reported that *both* NWOM ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.02$) and PWOM ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .89$) had an impact on their brand decision. Fully 83.8% of respondents agreed that the last instance of received PWOM affected their brand

choice decision and 68.6% similarly agreed for NWOM. A significant positive correlation was obtained for responses to the two impact statements, suggesting that persons who reported that PWOM had an impact on their brand choice decisions also reported that NWOM influenced their choices, r ($N = 393$) = .20, $p < .01$. The tendency for a higher percentage of participants to attest to the specific influence on brand choice of PWOM when compared with NWOM could be attributed in part to the greater frequency and salience of PWOM instances. In fact, nearly twice as many respondents were unable to recall the specific category pertaining to the NWOM instance ($N = 145$) than those who could not recall the category linked to the PWOM instance ($N = 77$).

Offline WOM versus online WOM. Offline WOM has been found to be more prevalent, trustworthy, and influential compared with online WOM. The Keller Faye TalkTrack^{TM} monitoring system of all marketing-relevant conversations in the US revealed that the ratio of offline to online WOM is 9:1, with offline WOM rated as more credible and more likely to inspire a purchase. Our questionnaire findings pertaining to the online/offline WOM distinction revealed areas in which respondents' beliefs were more consistent with ungrounded assumptions than empirical evidence. Study 1 participants maintained that NWOM was more frequent than PWOM in the online context, $\chi^2 = 12.0$ ($p < .005$, $df = 2$), and the sample was nearly evenly split with regard to the relative frequency of PWOM/NWOM offline, $\chi^2 = .54$ ($p > .05$, $df = 2$), in contrast to research evidence to the contrary (e.g., Godes & Mayzlin, 2006; McConnell & Huba, 2007). However, consistent with prior research (e.g., Marketingcharts.com, 2008), participants evaluated offline WOM as relatively more powerful than online WOM, $\chi^2 = 26.1$ ($p < .001$, $df = 2$).

Study 2 also assessed participants' beliefs about the frequency that the typical consumer transmits and receives WOM (online and offline) about products, brands, services, or companies from others during a typical week. Although estimates varied greatly, respondents reported that the typical consumer transmits WOM on average 10.64 times per week ($SD = 12.23$) and receives WOM on average 16.34 times per week ($SD = 19.38$). These averages greatly underestimate the frequency of WOM according to studies that have monitored how much consumers talk about products and brands, which have shown that the average consumer has about 125 product/service conversations per week, during which specific brands are mentioned 56-90 times (Siegel, 2006).

We asked Study 2 respondents to indicate the *main* source of information about WOM (as a form of communication). Participants reported their knowledge about WOM was mostly shaped via direct experience (53.9%) and friends/fellow students (22.6%), with research literature (4.3%), seminars/conferences or business classes (10.4%), and trade literature/popular press/TV (7.0%) significantly less likely to be cited as the main source of WOM information, $\chi^2 = 133.2$ ($p < .001$, $df = 5$). Participants reported that the primary means by which they receive WOM about a company and/or its offerings is from other consumers (67.5%), online social networks (21.1%), traditional mass media (7.9%), and company websites (0.9%). In response to an open-ended question asking for a brief description as to why they recalled the last instance of WOM they received, the primary factors cited as making WOM memorable were its utilitarian value (i.e., assisted a purchase; 25.3%), characteristics of the source (such as credibility or expertise; 22.0%), category involvement (20.9%), and the strong valence of the PWOM or NWOM (14.3%).

WOM Facts and Fallacies: Summary

Our review of the extant WOM literature and the results of two exploratory questionnaire studies revealed some common assumptions about WOM that are not entirely—if at all—grounded in empirical research. Our surveys revealed that business professionals and students adhere to both facts and fallacies concerning WOM (see Table 1). The disparity between common wisdom and empirical evidence is perhaps most evident in terms of the factors believed to be most likely to drive WOM. Our results showed that respondents tend to believe that when WOM occurs, it is likely to have been prompted by customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. While not negating the potentially important impact satisfaction can have in generating positive buzz that can attract new customers to a brand, when WOM is only considered in relation to satisfaction/ dissatisfaction, a large part of the overall WOM produced in everyday conversations is likely to be missed. Consequently, practitioners could stand to lose the opportunity to leverage WOM among consumers who frequently talk about products, services, and brands but who are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with those offerings. Efforts to measure and track WOM by relying solely on the use of customer satisfaction surveys will be limited in terms of identifying how much people are talking and what they are saying about a company and its offerings (which will be compounded if, as our results suggest, people overestimate the relative proportion of WOM occurring online). Moreover, the misguided beliefs that NWOM is both more frequent and influential than PWOM could encourage practitioners to unduly focus their efforts on strategies intended to counter negative talk about their offerings (e.g., rumor control) as opposed to efforts more inclined towards the promotion and leveraging of positive talk (e.g., referral marketing).

Table 1. Summary of Selected Research and Belief Findings
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What Empirical Research Shows	What Business Students & Practitioners Think
Satisfaction/dissatisfaction accounts for only a small percentage of overall WOM	Satisfaction/dissatisfaction is the primary driver of WOM
WOM is more likely to pertain to the current brand than non-owned brands.	WOM is more likely to pertain to the current brand than non-owned brands.
PWOM is more frequent than NWOM	NWOM is more frequent than PWOM (moderate agreement)
PWOM has a greater impact on choice than NWOM	NWOM has a greater impact on choice than PWOM
Offline WOM is more powerful than online WOM	Offline WOM is more powerful than online WOM
The average consumer has 125 product/ service conversations per week	The typical consumer transmits WOM on average 10.6 times per week and receives WOM on average 16.3 times per week

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Future Directions for WOM Research and Practice

If social media have changed the game in terms of the alacrity and reach of eWOM, then current knowledge about WOM requires a comprehensive reconsideration. We describe below four emerging considerations for WOM research and practice.

1. From Dyadic Instrumental Exchanges to Complex Network Conversations. One critical distinction between pWOM and eWOM that marketers need to acknowledge for meeting research or practical objectives is that the offline model of a static, dyadic exchange no longer applies, if it ever did, to the online environment. WOM transmission has long been understood as a simple dyadic exchange, with the better informed members of a community sharing what they know about products and services with passive, solicitous recipients. Based on this static, unidirectional model, subsequent research has focused on interpersonal dyads (WOM source and WOM seeker), whose roles are presumed to be fixed throughout the interaction.

Social media and emerging technologies have fundamentally changed the ways people engage with each other; as a result, the instrumental perspective of WOM as a means of achieving private consumption goals, with participants playing unchanging roles in the process, is far too limiting. Toder-Alon et al.'s (2014) rhetorical analysis of online community discussions revealed how participants may play multiple, dynamic roles in the complex exchange of information and opinions that are better described as conversations than transactions, whereby affiliation with the group can provide social identification and social integration benefits. WOM may simultaneously influence a variety of consumption behaviors across multiple participants.

2. Offline WOM and Online WOM: A Symbiotic Relationship. Social media have become integrated as a fundamental element of everyday life for many people. Given the increasing pervasiveness of social media and the dynamic interplay between various social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs), marketers need to stop treating online and offline WOM as if they were separate, discrete entities, or to assume that each WOM conversation is unique and involves different participants. Groeger and Buttle (2004) conducted social network analyses of referral campaigns and found that whereas weak ties may increase reach, strong ties may increase frequency, and that multiple exposures to the same WOM content indicates that many campaigns may overestimate their actual reach. Yet, marketers still are not in a position to assess the degree of conversational overlap between online and offline WOM participants. From a managerial perspective, the specific origins of WOM or the relative frequency of online versus eWOM are far less important than determining where specific hotbeds of WOM activity are located, both online and offline. These points not only complicate the monitoring and measurement of WOM and its outcomes, but also suggest that marketing practitioners not put all their eggs in one social media basket in efforts to leverage consumer conversations.

3. Rethinking "WOM on Steroids". The "social steroids" notion holds that if a face-to-face conversation signifies a potentially important WOM interaction, then a comment on social media represents that same quality interaction multiplied by the number of people participating in the network. However, this promising argument has been tempered by evidence suggesting that high levels of social media users do not actively engage with online content but that a vast majority of sharing occurs in spontaneous conversational WOM encounters (e.g., Keller, 2012).

Mere presence is not enough to get people talking; rather, the best way to have an online WOM impact is to create content that consumers will want to share or that is "talkable" (Wetpaint, 2009). Also, Reichelt et al. (2014) found that the trustworthiness of online content is key to whether that content positively affects attitudes toward and intentions to read eWOM.

4. <u>Traditional Media Still Matter</u>. It is easy for marketing communicators to assume that WOM in the contemporary marketing landscape is all about social media and non-traditional communication channels. The aforementioned dynamic between offline and eWOM, and the continued high levels of ad spending on traditional media, should at least for the foreseeable future put that notion to rest. Some of the tried-and-true methods of traditional marketing communication continue to bear relevance to online WOMM efforts, albeit with some necessary tweaking based on essential differences in the ways consumers interact with traditional and non-traditional media. Much can be gleaned from lessons learned over the years from traditional marketing communication research, although the application of the research findings to social media WOMM efforts must be implemented with caution.

Conclusion

The importance of WOM is likely to rise in coming years, posing both opportunities and threats to marketers. As marketing continues to evolve along with emerging technologies and the concomitant development of consumer connectedness and influence, it is likely that the prevalence, nature, and dynamics of WOM also will undergo various changes. Nonetheless, given the current state of knowledge derived from a rapidly expanding body of scientific WOM investigations and practical applications, marketers stand to be in a better position to separate WOM facts from fallacies and to develop more astute marketing efforts.

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