

MANAGING

Governance and Regulation

Passing On a Charity's Message

Groups find an old method, word of mouth, can create buzz



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS CASABURI, FOR THE CHRONICLE

Virgil Simons, founder of The Prostate Net, enlisted barbers to warn black men about their cancer risk.

At right are examples of the promotional materials the barbers distributed; the campaign resulted in about 10,000 men getting screened for prostate cancer.



By Jennifer C. Berkshire

WHEN the Center for Constitutional Rights, in New York, sought to get the word out about its Telephone Justice campaign—an effort to cut the amount families of prison inmates pay for telephone calls made from the state's correctional facilities—the group didn't follow the traditional public-relations route and take out an advertisement in *The New York Times*. Instead, the advocacy organization turned to the oldest communication method of all: the grapevine.

The group embraced an approach known as word-of-mouth marketing, a formal effort to get people to spread the word about campaigns, causes, and even corporate products. To get people on the street talking about the telephone-fee issue, the Center for Constitutional Rights first identified individuals in neighborhoods most affected by the issue, including family members of prisoners.

"We knew that in order for us to make any kind of advances with the campaign, we needed to get a larger part of the population engaged with the issues," says Dana Kaplan, an organizer of the Telephone Justice campaign. "And to reach the young people, the immigrants, the people of color, we had to think about the messaging and the message."

Reaching New Audiences

For help with its word-of-mouth effort, the center enlisted Guerrilla Tactics Media, a San Francisco marketing firm best known for its work on the Truth Campaign, a high-profile anti-tobacco . The firm worked with the advocacy group to identify key people in the relevant neighborhoods who could talk up the cause—including local political leaders, artists, and DJs—and then to help train and educate them about the issue. The new spokespeople were charged with spreading the word about telephone fees, through conversations with friends, neighbors, and co-workers and at big public events, such as parades and hip-hop shows.

"This is a way for us to reach a whole different audience," says Ms. Kaplan. "We're getting to people who don't read *The New York Times*, people who are actually dealing with the issue we're talking about."

A year ago, the center took its campaign public, debuting a two-story billboard at the corner of a busy Harlem intersection. The billboard, which Guerrilla Tactics Media secured by persuading an advertising company to donate the space, promoted a fictional corporation called WorldDom Telecommunications and an irreverent slogan ("Greed, corruption and high-ass rates") to make a humorous point about a serious issue. Beneath the sign, activists set up shop to provide additional information and cellphones, on which passers-by made some 200 calls to the governor's office.

Ms. Kaplan credits the billboard effort and the news-media coverage that it garnered with giving the crusade a major lift, including the passage of a bill in the New York State Assembly that would end the practice of requiring prison inmates to make only collect calls and allow them to pay market rates. Her group is now campaigning to get the bill passed by the State Senate as it comes

up for a vote this fall, and she says it has been successful in reaching a constituency that cares about its issue: "Changing our messaging and our marketing allowed us to do that."

Taking Charge of the Talk

Word-of-mouth marketing is not a new concept. Strip away all of the buzzwords and it is essentially the oldest advertising approach in the world: one person talking to another about a product, an idea, or a cause. But in a culture saturated with advertisements—and people increasingly inured to such ads—word of mouth is becoming an increasingly popular way to spread a message. "What's new is that people are now trying to turn it from an art into a science," says Peter Waldheim, a senior consultant to the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, a Chicago nonprofit trade group for corporations and charities that want to use the technique more effectively.

For charities, the appeal of word-of-mouth marketing is obvious. It relies on a concept with which many nonprofit organizations are already familiar, motivating members and volunteers to translate talk into action. "If you're a nonprofit, people are already talking about you. And if you're doing your job well, you already have 500 or 5,000 people that will go out and spread the word about the campaign you're doing," says Mr. Waldheim. "This is basically an opportunity for organizations to think strategically and shape the word of mouth going on around them."

One added benefit: Word-of-mouth marketing can also be considerably cheaper than a traditional marketing campaign. While hiring professionals to build buzz isn't cheap—Ms. Kaplan says that hiring Guerrilla Tactics Media cost about the same as a small, traditional public-relations firm—a charity need not spend heavily to get people talking.

"A good campaign doesn't necessarily require hiring a firm or paying a fee," says Andy Sernovitz, chief executive officer of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association. "If there's something good to be said about your group or nonprofit, people will be more than happy to say it for free."

But as word-of-mouth marketing gains in popularity, questions surrounding its use are on the rise too. Mr. Sernovitz, for example, cautions any charity that is considering a word-of-mouth strategy to follow the rule of full disclosure.

"Have your volunteers say that they're volunteering for your group," he says. "It makes what they're saying more powerful in a way because you have people who genuinely believe in what they're saying."

Regardless of how charities approach their word-of-mouth campaigns, though, they should be prepared for one essential lesson: Just because people are talking about a charity doesn't guarantee that they will be saying favorable things. Says Mr. Waldheim: "If your organization or your cause doesn't have integrity at its core, watch out, because no one can control what people say when they start talking."

In Search of Good Buzz

The National Outdoor Leadership School, in Lander, Wyo., has long relied on word of mouth to attract new students, says Bruce Palmer, director of admission and marketing for the 40-year-old nonprofit school, which teaches leadership skills through extended wilderness expeditions.

“Eighty percent of our students first hear about us from other students, from the parent of a student, or from an outdoor person,” he says. “We’ve never done any paid advertising or TV ads.”

But when Mr. Palmer read about a word-of-mouth marketing firm called BzzAgent in *Fast Company* magazine, he saw an opportunity to further raise the school’s profile.

BzzAgent, a four-year-old Boston company that creates word-of-mouth campaigns for businesses, has more than 87,000 volunteer agents scattered across the country who agree to talk up such products as Lee Jeans and books published by Wharton School Publishing.

These so-called “brand evangelists” don’t get paid for plugging products, although they can compete for prizes—generally merchandise donated by the companies and charities on whose behalf the campaigns are conducted—by reporting back to BzzAgent on the results of their conversations with friends, family members, and co-workers.

“People participate because they like the idea of promoting a product or a cause that they’re enthusiastic about,” says Tim Lash, a BzzAgent account manager. “The rewards don’t seem to matter that much.”

Last year the company began offering free help to a handful of charities.

“This is a way for us to show that word of mouth isn’t just a platform for selling products,” notes Mr. Lash, who oversees GoodBzz, the company’s program to serve nonprofit groups, and has coordinated word-of-mouth campaigns for three charities, including the national March of Dimes, which used the firm’s services to get people talking about its new online message board for parents of premature babies.

To get a sense of how the process works, Mr. Palmer even enlisted to become a BzzAgent himself, participating in a handful of campaigns to promote business books that interested him.

“What it showed me was the tools that BzzAgent has,” he says. “It seemed like something that we could really benefit from.”

For the leadership school, the collaboration with the marketing firm, which offered its help pro bono, produced a wealth of information, including polling and survey data from the 3,000 BzzAgents who signed up to talk to their friends, family members, and associates about the school over the course of three months.

The BzzAgent team produced a “BzzGuide,” detailing the history of the school, its differences from other outdoor-leadership programs, and its famous graduates. A list of suggested targets helped the volunteer agents identify people who were likely to be interested in the school (those who work outdoors, play outdoors, or

have participated in an outdoor program, for example) along with situations and topics that easily lend themselves to conversations about the National Outdoor Leadership School.

Most important for Mr. Palmer’s purposes were the 2,000 reports that came back—individual accounts provided by the volunteer agents in which they detailed the content of conversations that they had had about the school. But if the reports gave Mr. Palmer a rare opportunity to listen in on what people had been saying, they also reminded him that not everything they said was complimentary.

“Cost kept cropping up,” says Mr. Palmer. “People complained that our programs seemed expensive and that they didn’t really understand what the cost went towards.”

That information, he notes, has already changed the way that the National Outdoor Leadership School presents itself to potential students. For example, the latest catalog now features financial-aid information front and center, and is much more explicit about what students get for their money.

Mr. Palmer also came away convinced that the school need not rely on thousands of anonymous “agents” to talk it up when smaller, ready-made groups of people could do the job. “BzzAgent taught us that we need to do a better job of telling our story and that our graduates are the logical people to tell that story,” he says. “We haven’t been asking enough of our graduates or providing them with good enough tools.”

Challenging Conversation

If word-of-mouth marketing can get people talking about feel-good charitable campaigns, what about more controversial topics, including the hot-button political issues on which Americans are deeply divided?

Some professional word-of-mouth marketers, including BzzAgent, steer clear of nonprofit organizations that engage in any kind of political or religious work.

“The campaigns we do have to be general enough to have broad appeal,” says Mr. Lash. “We can’t be effective if half of our agents don’t want to participate because they don’t agree with the issue.”

But Celia Alario, whose Los Angeles consulting group, PR for People and the Planet, develops word-of-mouth and other communications strategies for charities, maintains that word of mouth is ideally suited to tackle complex, even polarizing issues. The trick, she says, is to have the message delivered by a familiar messenger. “In general, people respond better when the source is known in some way, when there’s trust,” she says. “Peer-to-peer contact, one person going out and speaking to another person in order to create a face-to-face dialogue—these are the ways that you establish trust.”

Ms. Alario is currently “building buzz” for a series of documentary films about climate change—perhaps not obvious fodder for idle chatter.

“It’s not useful to start out by talking to people about global warming and climate change, because then right away you have to

get into the question of whether they're real or not," she says. "But maybe you're talking to someone who has asthma, or their kids have asthma, or they have concerns about national security. That's where you start."

Medical Advocacy

Virgil Simons, a health-care advocate, faced neither politics nor partisanship when he sought to build a word-of-mouth campaign among black men about the dangers of prostate cancer, but something just as challenging: His was an issue that people simply did not want to talk about. "These are men who don't like to talk about medical issues unless they've got an arm literally hanging out of its socket," says Mr. Simons, a prostate-cancer survivor who lives in Guttenburg, N.J., where he runs Prostate Net (<http://www.prostate-online.com>), a nonprofit organization with a \$1.6-million operating budget that he created to put information about the disease online.

So Mr. Simons went to a place where he thought black men might be willing to talk, and to listen: the barbershop.

In conjunction with the 2004 opening of the film *Barbershop 2*, and with financial help from the MGM film company and other

corporate sponsors, Mr. Simons coordinated a nationwide program in which barbers were trained by their local medical centers to talk about the disease, the second-leading cause of death in black men.

A barbershop may seem an unlikely place in which to base a health-care campaign but, as Mr. Simons notes, barbers already have health expertise of a sort: They are trained to recognize melanoma and changing hair texture, because both are signs of disease. What's more, he says, barbers have historically played an important role as both entrepreneurs and communicators. "I saw an opportunity to get the word out from people that black men trust," says Mr. Simons.

The \$1.5-million campaign has already had some impressive results. More than 300 barbers have volunteered to encourage some 10,000 of their customers to go to local medical centers for free prostate-cancer screenings, which so far have detected 452 cases of the disease. Most important, says Mr. Simons, the program created a way for men to talk about a sensitive subject in a place where they felt free to speak openly.

"People know the health-care messages, but they don't act on them, perhaps because they don't trust the messenger," says Mr. Simons, who is now working to place computer kiosks with information about prostate cancer in barbershops across the country. "This was a way to bridge that distrust."

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