

MediaPost

WOM: Teens Speak Another Language, Face Time Is Crucial

by Karlene Lukovitz, Wednesday, Aug 15, 2007 5:01 AM ET

WHEN IT COMES TO BUILDING positive brand word-of-mouth (WOM) among teenagers, the action isn't all on the Internet. In fact, almost two-thirds of information and opinions about products and services is exchanged face-to-face, according to a new study by the Keller Fay Group marketing research firm.

The study--a survey of 2,046 teens (ages 13-17) conducted between January and May of this year--confirms the power of the teen grapevine and the wisdom of brands that are already hip to the critical in-person component in leveraging teen WOM, such as Chevrolet and American Eagle Outfitters.

The survey findings help quantify the extent and dynamics of the WOM phenomenon among teens.

On average, teens engage in 145 WOM conversations about products and services each week, containing 77 brand mentions--compared to averages of 71 WOMs and 22 brand mentions among the general U.S. public.

Importantly, 57% of teens' WOMs include mentions of brands' marketing and media efforts, compared to 48% of WOMs among the general public.

And yes, teens are three times as likely to exchange such information via technology: 19% of teen WOMs occur online (text messaging/IM, e-mails, chatrooms/blogs), versus just 7% among the population as a whole.

However, fully 63% of teen WOMs still occur in person (versus 73% for the overall population).

(At least when it comes to brand WOMs, teens are actually somewhat less reliant on the phone than people of other ages: They use wireless/landlines for about 13% of WOM communications, compared to 17% for the general public).

"The Internet is obviously an extremely important channel for marketers seeking to influence teens, but we shouldn't forget that teens are together much of the time--in school, at malls, hanging out together at their friends' homes," Ed Keller, CEO of Keller Fay, whose TalkTrack service monitors the WOM communications of thousands of Americans on a weekly basis, tells *Marketing Daily*.

"Marketers clearly need to use multiple touchpoints, being sure to take advantage of face-to-face opportunities as a key part of their mix."

The findings also underscore the importance of a) heeding teens' needs and preferences in creating products in the first place and b) creating programs and messages tailored to teens to maximize the likelihood that a brand will find its way into their conversations, says Keller, a co-author of *The Influentials*.

A look at the brands getting the most positive buzz among teens seems to bear out the wisdom of these fundamentals.

The 10 garnering the greatest number of "net positive" mentions among teens, in descending order, are: iPod, American Eagle, Dr Pepper, Chevrolet, Nintendo, Sony, Target, Xbox, Wal-Mart and Mountain Dew.

Half of these teen-favored brands (iPod, Chevrolet, Sony, Target and Wal-Mart) overlap with the top 10 for the public at large:

Among Teens

- 1 **iPod**
- 2 **American Eagle**
- 3 **Dr Pepper**
- 4 **Chevrolet**
- 5 **Nintendo**
- 6 **Sony**
- 7 **Target**
- 8 **Xbox**
- 9 **Wal-Mart**
- 10 **Mountain Dew**

General Public

- 1 **Coca-Cola**
- 2 **Pepsi**
- 3 **Wal-Mart**
- 4 **Sony**
- 5 **Toyota**
- 6 **Target**
- 7 **Chevrolet**
- 8 **iPod**
- 9 **Apple**
- 10 **Hewlett-Packard**

But all of them share two critical commonalities: Teen-friendly products and aggressive, teen-targeted multichannel marketing components within their overall marketing strategies.

"Some people are surprised by teens' positive perception of Chevrolet," acknowledges Keller, "but Chevrolet has come out with cars, like the Aveo, that address high school and college kids' need for good cars at affordable price points. And making smart buying decisions is, of course, the whole reason that people exchange information about brands."

The Aveo's affordability (an Aveo5 starts at \$10,560) and cool standard features (like an MP3 input jack) are bound to generate WOM among young people, and Chevrolet is doing a good job at feeding the buzz through marketing that reaches and resonates with teens, Keller notes.

Case in point: In launching its new E85 lines of ethanol-mixture-fueled trucks and cars (including Aveo versions), Chevy focused first on the eco-conscious teen market. The car maker debuted its broadcast ads on last year's MTV Video Music Awards, ran live events in conjunction with the awards and is using various efforts to link the E85's "Live Green, Go Yellow" brand message with MTV's own, year-long "Break the Addiction" (to fossil fuels) campaign. ("Yellow" refers to the corn from which most U.S.-produced ethanol is produced.)

Chevy's strategy also includes reduceuse.com, dedicated to helping consumers reduce fossil-fuel use. The site encourages visitors to upload video clips showing the fun activities that they'll be able to engage in because they'll be spending less time fueling up their cars.

Meanwhile, American Eagle--the only apparel brand that made teens' top 10 positive buzz rankings--is hitting all the right messages and touchpoints to feed WOM about its "laidback, current, affordable" clothing for 15- to-20-year-olds.

AE emphasizes its commitment to high ethical standards of business, including the AE Foundation, which "gives back to communities by supporting student-related programs focused on youth development and conserving our environment."

Further, the brand's new "77Entertainment" (77E) platform aims to take teen-targeted, multichannel marketing to new levels. The platform features original and user-generated content on ae.com, on sites such as YouTube, MySpace and Facebook, on television--and of course, in AE's stores.

The platform was launched on Aug. 1, during MTV's "The Real World Sydney" show, with the debut of "It's a Mall World," an AE-produced, 12-episode series of shorts about two record-store employees (who idolize the "perfect" teenage girl working in the AE Outfitters store across the way).

AE not only invested heavily in the quality of the comedy series--hiring "Hatchet" writer/director Adam Green, for instance--it also threw an elaborate face-to-face premiere event in Los Angeles. Teens attending this "denim carpet" event got a sneak peak at the creation of the series; had their "It's a Mall World" T-shirts, posters and 45 records signed by cast members; and hit an after-party featuring entertainment by a cool DJ, gift bags and other goodies.

Future 77E offerings will range from music to reality to drama, as well as more comedy, according to AE.