

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF WORD-OF-MOUTH AND ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH

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Abstract: As the economy shifts towards the economy of wealth, consumers are bombarded with products and services, all supported by a broad range of aggressive promotional and advertising techniques. The response for a large part of today's consumers is an increasing resistance to traditional advertising, and the use of Word-of-Mouth as a more personal and trustful source for products and services related information. The purpose of this paper is to assess the evolution of Word-of-Mouth into the information abundant – empowered consumer, web 2.0 age, while considering the high levels of complexity behind the concept.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, big brands got bigger. They have the technology to deliver good price/quality products and services, they have the resources to innovate and keep ahead of the competition, they can use the media that allows them to reach and influence a wide audience. But in recent years, things started to change for both companies and consumers. The economy is more and more dominated by services instead of products, and innovation is closer at hand for smaller, more agile companies. The “long tail” is becoming a reality, as consumers are moving away from the “crowd” and demand more personalized products and services. Traditional media does not reach the targeted audience the same way is used to do 10 years ago, as individuals are putting more efforts in resisting the aggressive advertising they were exposed to in recent years [[1] p.53]. The classical approach of interruption marketing, where marketers are doing their best to interrupt the individual from what he is doing to pay attention to what they have to offer [[17] p.36,46], is less and less popular, as the consumers and businesses look for information when they want and need, and where they consider appropriate to find the right kind of information that would most help them reach the best buying decision, for whatever products or services they are looking for. Also, smaller companies do not have the resources to engage in large advertising campaigns, nor in many cases desire this, looking instead for less expensive ways to reach niche, well targeted audiences. This paper focuses on word-of-mouth as the alternative to the traditional media and marketing approach, in what some specialist say it is a return to the old ways of marketing.

2. WOM definition, WOM types and related concepts

In day-to-day life, individuals talk to each other about their experiences, and among these experiences about products and services they know, have heard of, or use. Often, individuals rely on advice or recommendation from friends, acquaintances or business partners to fundament their buying decisions. Word-of-Mouth (WOM) is the process of informal information sharing between consumers about products and services. In this case, a consumer is also a company, through the inside individuals that have the authority to make decisions in the purchasing process. Word-of-Mouth Marketing (WOMM) represents the efforts of a company to “encourage, facilitate and amplify marketing-relevant communication among consumers” [[19] p.5].

As the Internet grew, and people were able to create and manipulate content on the web in what it is called the web 2.0 era, new channels, techniques and possibilities lead to the evolution of WOM to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

On the consumer side, the main advantage perceived is that WOM is considered to be trustful, because the above mentioned sources are independent and free from commercial influence [[12]

p.2]. Friends and family do not have commercial interests to promote or demote a brand, and they are offering the information, their opinions and advice without seeking direct benefits, and this is why researchers state that WOM is more effective than print ads, personal selling or radio advertising [[4] p.2]. Also, through WOM consumers reduce perceived risk [[20] p.2], especially when it comes to expensive products, or never-tried services, by relying on the experiences and opinions from people they acknowledged as trustful. From the company point of view, WOM is the possibility to turn customers into sales agents [[19] p.7]. That way, an individual that is willing to spread the word about the company's products or services is seen by the company as the combined economic value of all the individuals that he could influence in his lifetime, rather than a one-time economic transaction [[19] p.7]. Once started, WOM is a self sufficient mechanism, that could replicate, in theory, without the need of extra efforts from the company's side [[19] p.7], so WOM could lead to more sales, more sales would lead to more WOM, and so on [[5] p.1].

In the online environment, in the web 2.0 age, WOM gained new valences and had seen new possibilities. E-mails, instant messaging (IM), blogs, micro-blogs, brand communities, consumer reviews, social networks are means to promote WOM. WOMM benefited from a lot of attention in recent years, and from that development an association was created, Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA), to provide guidance and structure for WOM. Dealing especially with the online part, the eWOM, WOMMA recognizes a broad range of marketing techniques under the WOMM umbrella, among which buzz marketing, viral marketing, evangelist marketing or brand blogging [[25] p.3]. Viral marketing is one particular WOM concept that received a lot of attention. Viral marketing is about creating a message around an idea that is so extraordinary, so compelling to drive individuals to pass it on to their friends or contacts [[13] p.7]. In viral marketing, the message has to be simple and meaningful, and it has to attract attention. Also, it has to be designed in such fashion that consumers would be able to pass it along effortlessly. These characteristics should allow the message to spread exponentially among consumers, like viruses, hence the name of the concept. Initially associated with e-mail, viral marketing could take today the form of a brief text, a photo, a podcast or even a video, passed along as-it-is or as a link via e-mail, IM, micro-blog service or any social sharing platform. Viral marketing can be intentional or unintentional [[4] p.1]. Probably the most famous unintentional viral campaign was the one Hotmail promoted in its early days, when every e-mail sent with the Hotmail platform included a URL at the bottom of the message directing to a page where every non-user could easily and without costs create an account [[19] p.17]. The individuals where sending e-mails without the intention of "converting" their contacts into Hotmail users, yet the message was delivered fast and helped Hotmail achieve a tremendous growth in less than 2 years. In intentional viral, individuals are so attracted by the message, that voluntarily pass along the message, and one example is the "Numa Numa" dance performed by a user that filmed himself with a webcam, posted it on YouTube, and received more than 700 million views [[1] p.83]. Viral marketing is a very fast developing phenomenon, but as the excitement fades, so the viral marketing losses power [[1] p.91]. This is why viral is just one form of WOM, and to be successful WOM needs to use a broader range of techniques, to keep the customers happy, and spreading the word.

Regardless of medium, online or offline, there can be no certainty about the outcome of WOM. WOM has two dimensions, volume and valence, and valence has two sides, positive (PWOM) and negative (NWOM) word-of-mouth [[5] p.1]. In WOMM the company can do its best to encourage and facilitate the spread of WOM. But as already acknowledged, WOM is self-sufficient once started, so the majority of the action happens outside the company, outside its area of influence. WOM is a powerful force, but it can act for or against the company, and from a certain point forward, the company has little or no power of influence.

3. The new marketing and the rising influence of the consumer

The UK's Chartered Institute of Marketing is defining marketing as "The management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably" [22]. But the same prestigious Institute acknowledges that the definition might be outdated, and the responsible factors are the Internet and the globalization. Because of these factors, the organization no longer can live under the impression that it can "manage" customers, the reality is

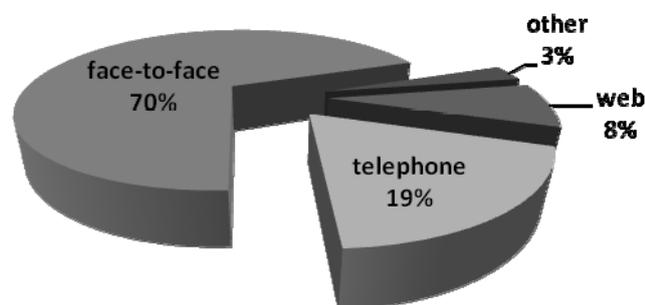
that the customers interact with the organization, as powerful and demanding partners, and as the center of the organization preoccupation [23].

The abundance of information and the ease of obtaining them that comes along with the rise of the web puts the customer into a stronger position vis-à-vis the company, a position the company is not traditionally accustomed with, but for which it has to prepare and adjust with swiftness. The classical push-marketing approach, where marketers had the mission of convincing the customers to buy the already designed and produced goods or services, is replaced by a new pull-marketing, where marketers engage with the customers, listen to them, and then send along the distribution channel the information of their needs and desires for the producers to deliver what the consumer want, and when they want it. This concept is closely connected with the 8-th “P” in the marketing mix, “Partnership”, which completes the long-lasting model of the 4 and extended 7 “P’s” [[3] p.514-516].

It used to be mostly about one-way communication, from the company to the audience, with brief encounters such as focus-groups, brainstorming sessions, questionnaires, where companies were listening and trying to get a glimpse of what consumers had to say. But today, it is more about interactivity, because the consumers now have their own audience, and they too can talk the word, good or bad, about the company. Consumers can have their own blogs, can write on Twitter in less than 140 characters, can have a personal page on Facebook or MySpace, and between these, can have hundreds of friends or contacts that can be aware of whatever message they are sending to the world, and these friends can take the message and send it further to their friends and so on.

Some authors suggest that eWOM is the new marketing. Instead, the majority state that the WOM and eWOM should be used together with the traditional media and tools. One argument is that only approximately 25% of the world population in September 2009 has an Internet presence [24]. Another argument is that WOM is closely connected with traditional marketing and advertising. Studies showed that 8% of the advice came from the web, 70% came from face-to-face interaction and 19% from telephone interaction [[6] p.2]. So eWOM, although it has great potential, is not yet replacing the traditional ways of interaction. Conventional non-electronic WOM is limited to the network of social contacts of the originator, while eWOM offers much wider interaction possibilities, even if it is about “weak” connections. In offline WOM, the communication tends to be closer to the one-to-one extreme, while in online WOM the widest spread model is the one-to-many model, in the form of a review a consumer writes on an opinion-based website, or a remark on a personal page on Facebook. To ignite WOM, and to facilitate the spread, companies need to reach the consumers, and while the web is not yet the standard, companies have to create a balanced mix between traditional advertising and promotion tools and new approaches [[13] p.9].

Fig. 1 Sources of advice in WOM



There are 3 types of personalities close related to WOM: the mavens, the connectors and the salesmen. Mavens are also called vanguard customers, and they are those consumers that have broader than the average knowledge about a certain product or service, and represent the first adopters and the ones that start spreading the rumor. The connectors are the ones with a large social network, with lots of contacts even though, especially on the web, these connections are what might be considered weak connections. The salesmen are the ones with the charisma and the persuasiveness, the ones that have the ability to convince friends and contacts into adopting new products and services [[13] p.8]. Between these types of personalities, two other essential

types of individuals for WOM can be found: evangelists and opinion leaders. Evangelists are the ones that understand the brand, product, or service, and act as the front offensive in WOM related promotion. Opinion leaders are especially found among connectors, they have a large network of contacts that look up to them, because they gained their trust and respect in the course of time. In online world, opinion leaders rise from the ones that “speak-up” more frequently, and those that are perceived as having a high level of expertise in a particular field. These types of individuals are all essential in WOM, as they are the 10% of the community that influence the other 90% [[13] p.2].

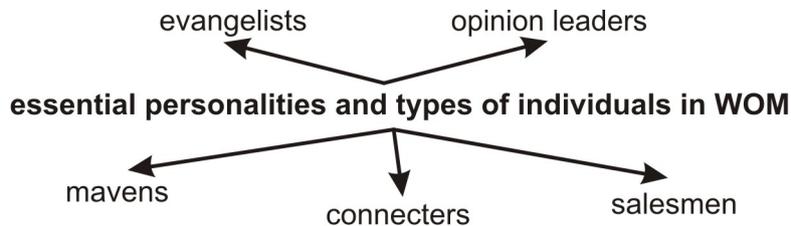


Fig. 2 Essential personalities and types of individuals in WOM

WOM is a consumer-centric process, as the consumer is the engine, the driving force behind WOM. Being so, it is very important for the company to understand consumer behavior. In WOM, as in any type of communication, there are two sides – the initiators and the receivers. Much study has been undertaken about the initiators and why they engage in WOM, and the most important reasons were found to be the need to be recognized in a group or community, the need to participate, to receive validation from the other members of the community about the decisions they make [[1] p.25,32-33]. Receivers on the other hand are also very important for the company as they are the ones that may convert into buyers, but also as they may become the next wave of initiators. From the receiver’s point of view, information obtained from WOM is far more important than any information that could be obtained through company controlled channels [[18] p.1]

Customers are again divided into two groups: novices and experts, groups that perceive WOM from two different perspectives. While expert consumers seek attribute related information, novices seek benefit related information, or the translation of attributes into benefits, as novices do not have the knowledge or skill to evaluate the products or services through their more “technical” attributes. Speaking about online WOM, in particular about online reviews, experts will be more influenced by the attribute-type of reviews, while novices will be influenced by the benefit-type of reviews. Experts are more concerned with the type and content of the reviews, while for the novices the stronger impact is from the number of reviews, being considered that a higher number of reviews means a higher number of users, so it should be a more popular product, so a less risky purchase. Also, there has been found to be a negative relation between the amount of experience and the need for information search for consumers – the experienced users feel that they do not need to search for more information, as they consider themselves experts [[15] p.3-9]. Going back to products and services attributes, these can be divided into 3 classes: search attributes – the attributes that are already known before the purchase, the attributes that determine the consumer to search the product or service; experience attributes – the ones that are knowledgeable after the user experiences the service or tries or consumes the products; credence attributes – the more volatile type of attributes, like confidence or trust for example, that may not be discovered even after the purchase or use, or can be developed in time. It has been found that the impact of WOM is higher for evaluating credence attributes than information or experience attributes. Search attributes are the simplest to understand and more visible type of attributes, so the best source of this kind of information is the seller itself. To the other extreme of the spectrum, credence attributes are the least transparent and most difficult to assess, so the seller might be tempted to cheat or to mislead to reach his goal, especially on short term, so the consumer goes to WOM in search of a trustable source of information in order to decide whether to act or not [[11] p.2,5]. In their purchasing decision process, consumers are pursuing two different types of goals – promotion goals, used for achieving desirable goals, and prevention goals, used for avoiding unpleasant or undesirable situations. While promotion goals extend to a very broad range of purchasing

decisions, like buying a camcorder with the goal of recording images for the joy of watching them in the coming years, prevention goals are mostly associated with security related products or services, like installing a security system in one's home, or keeping money in a bank account to prevent theft. These goals can even occur about the same type of product or service, one example being the online banking service, so for some people having an online banking system could mean the convenience of less traffic and lower rates, while for others not having one means preventing online hackers from getting the account details and emptying the account. Studies showed that for products associated with promotion consumption goals, consumers rate positive reviews as having more impact than negative ones, while for prevention goals, negative reviews are found to be influential [[21] p.2,5].

The above mentioned aspects are just some of the most important ones that are related to consumers and their behavior in connection to WOM. Researchers state that WOM has a strong impact in all AIDA phases of purchase, influencing consumer choice, purchase decisions, expectations, pre and post-usage attitudes [[4] p.2], [[18] p.2]. Also, as WOM is closely connected with the human behaviour, comes with a strong objectivity/subjectivity duality. All WOM can be considered as coming with a part of objective information – as in attributes or technical details, while carrying also a significant part of subjective information, driven by the initiator subjective and mostly unique experience with the product, brand or company, but also associated with the context and with the initiators understand and knowledge about the receiver of the WOM. Because it has been found that initiators do not necessarily recommend a product according to their negative or positive experience, as they can understand they have subjective tastes and preferences, and might generate positive WOM against their perceived negative experience [[10] p.2]. One such example could be a sports car, that for the initiator that owned such a car for a brief period of time, and didn't quite find it suiting for him as he might have thought it to be too rigid and not so comfortable for his preferences, could have not been a positive experience, but yet he could recommend it to a friend that he knows he values horsepower in a car, if he understands that the respective automobile has this quality [[7] p.3].

In term of consumer interactions, there is a strong difference between offline and online WOM. While online WOM offers wide range of audiences, fast propagating medium, and multiple relatively weak connections or relationships, offline WOM is characterized by stronger relations, a more limited network and speed of WOM propagation, but also draws from the majority of face-to-face interactions the benefits of the body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc [[18] p.3]. It is acknowledged that the most part of communication is non-verbal [[16] p.168], and this part could be considered as being lost in eWOM, although the virtual environment tried to overcome some of these limitations by introducing the emoticons, as ways of expressing the emotional states of the initiator or originator of the message.

4. Factors influencing WOM, WOM differentiations and triggers

Especially in viral marketing, there are what were called the "laws of the tipping point: the law of the few, of the stickiness factor, and of the power of context" [[13] p.5-8]. For a viral message to start spreading, there is a need for a few mavens, for an intriguing, interesting, attracting message and the right timing and context. WOM, in general, has been found to be triggered by messages, actions or interactions bound with strong emotions or sensations. Jokes, entertaining or not expected situations are likely to produce WOM, exclusivity, surprise and mystery are triggers of WOM, extreme satisfaction or dissatisfaction, commitment to the company, long relation to the firm or novelty of the products are causes that ignite WOM [[1] p.29], [[19] p.19], [[12] p.2-3]. Most of these triggers are associated with out of the ordinary aspects, so this is somewhat in contradiction with the long time assumption that satisfaction leads to WOM, instead, stronger emotions are needed to create WOM [[18] p.10]. Also, care must be taken, as the strong emotions can go either way, into positive or negative WOM.

There are a lot of factors that influence WOM, and numerous studies were conducted to find the positive or negative relationship between these factors and the creation of WOM. The level of expertise of the initiator has a strong impact on WOM; tie strength or closeness of the relationships developed between WOM participants has a positive influence on WOM; demographic similarity has been found to have a negative relation to WOM, as in the more different the initiator and

not be immediate, especially in the case of multiple failures, the once former loyal PWOM generator could turn into a detractor and start generate NWOM.

The equilibrium between PWOM and NWOM is very thin, as there are two major sides in this debate – some authors believe in the power of NWOM over PWOM, while the others support the opposite [[6] p.2,7-8], [[7] p.2,7]. Common knowledge state that bad news travel faster than good ones, and unsatisfied customers tell more people about their experience than the satisfied ones [[19] p.8] ,[[13] p.11]. At the same time, common sense but also research point out that “bad” products or services will not survive the harsh and competitive today’s market, so this could be translated into NWOM as being a rarity, occurring less frequently, and so it is seen as having a stronger impact when it appears than PWOM [[7] p.2,5]. While most of these authors back their claims upon conducted tests, studies and research, they might all be right, because WOM, and consequently PWOM and NWOM, are strongly context-related aspects, in the context including also the subjective nature of the human participants, being WOM or eWOM.

Considering the brand as an influencing factor, studies showed that in most cases PWOM is about the main brand, and NWOM about all the other brands [[7] p.7]. Considering perceived justice, after a product or service failure, if perceived justice is positive, NWOM is low and chances that the consumer will buy again from that provider are high [[2] p.18]. Speaking about context, if a positive comment is found on a seller’s brochure, or website, or even on a opinion website, it is found to be far less trustworthy than a negative comment, because positive comments or better said exaggerated or artificial ones could be suspected to be “arranged” or commercially influenced [[1] p.94, 110] [[6] p.2].

When considering WOM, it is very important to understand that once a message is out, it cannot be controlled, it may be influenced, but this depends highly, again, from context. Even PWOM could, at a certain point, in a certain node of the WOM network, be intentionally or unintentionally misinterpreted or reinterpreted and lead to a new string of NWOM that gets its roots from PWOM [[19] p.18]. One example could be an extraordinary powerful motorcycle, which receives a lot of PWOM from fans, but could at a certain point be judged as “too dangerous”, so the message will split and go in the NWOM directions for one part of the audience.

PWOM

NWOM



Fig. 4 The fragile equilibrium between PWOM and NWOM

6. The possibilities offered by service recovery in influencing WOM

Speaking again about common knowledge, it is much less costly to keep a customer, than to attract a new one [[14] p.1], [[2] p.2]. However, no matter how concerned a company is about delivering quality products and services to his clients, there are situations when the company fails. In this case, the consumer can act in several directions: exist silently, meaning that he does not complain but chooses not to work with that provider in the future; engage in NWOM without complaining or trying to get things solved; complain to the company; continue to keep with the company despite the failure [[9] p.1]. The last case is valid especially for strong brands that have high levels of loyalty from the consumer. When failure happens, the company has a “window” of opportunity to fix things, and if the problem is solved in a ppositive and timely manner, the resulting WOM could be a surprisingly increased PWOM, instead of NWOM. Although not fully supported by researchers, this “recovery paradox” could lead to higher PWOM than if the service was in the beginning a successful but average one. If instead the company acts poorly in solving the issues, the result could be an even higher level of NWOM that would have been generated if things were let unsolved in the first place [[19] p.9], [[14] p.1,2,6,7-11], [[9] p.1], [[2] p.2,6].

7. WOM advantages, difficulties and implications for businesses

WOM is important for individuals, and it is seen as a trustful and influential source of information. These very aspects make WOM equally important for companies, and although it is not a very controllable process, it is important to be understood, the triggers that drive WOM, the factors that

influence WOM, so the company could try to better control those factors that influence WOM that are still under its control, or under a certain level of influence.

WOM should be seen as a strategic approach, rather than as a one-time campaign. As opposed to a viral campaign, that can explode with great speed, but fade away just as easily, WOM is a long-run process with no deadline that the company should understand and all employees should be a part of [[1] p.94,110], [[19] p.4,7,10]. The day to day environment companies are part of is a very complex one, from technical, economical, social, legal and not only points of view. It is an environment characterized by uncertainty, so chaos theory could successfully be applied in analyzing WOM from the company's perspective. In chaos theory, small changes could, in few iterations, have great impacts [[13] p.3-4]. It is applicable in WOM, where the company even if able to set out a message, and apply some influence, the vast majority of action is happening outside the organization. The organization task is to act, that from the WOM perspective could be considered small changes, and do its best to reach the goal – PWOM, that in turn should lead to sales and loyalty.

Traditionally organization's possibility to influence WOM was by delivering products and services at least at the level of expected results, and through traditional advertising and sales force. Today, it is still much about delivering quality as promised, but there are now new possibilities of reaching customers directly, and with relatively low costs. Blogging for example, is a technique that is more and more used by consumers to express themselves, but also by businesses to reach directly to their audience. Companies are developing their own blogs, with the purpose of opening up, of engaging in conversation with their clients/consumers or future consumers, of being more transparent about the good and bad sides of the company and their products and services. Engaging in honest conversations on the web, dealing with real problems openly gives a human face to the companies, and takes away some of the traditional rigidness and closeness companies where used to. Also, monitoring other blogs that keep watch on the same sector could provide interesting information about trends and moves from the competitors [[17] p.72,81,88]. Mostly in the same way companies can engage their consumers or future consumers through the now countless social networks, and facilitate the creation of brand communities, that once in place, are a very tough, influential and powerful type of social network, that could work as a magnet and as a maven spreading PWOM for the company, and also defending it from NWOM.

There are many advantages to understanding and using WOM for companies. Viral for example is almost free, and if it succeeds, it could give a lot of popularity and almost instant awareness. In the online world, messages can be changed frequently, to test reactions and promote the most successful ones. From this point of view eWOM is more likely to be measured, as reviews for example reside and are left on websites, so there are more possibilities for companies to truly understand what consumers think of them and their products [[15] p.1]. Loyalty is a state that could be reached through direct interaction with the company and WOM, and can hardly be achieved through traditional advertising. WOM changes customers into salesmen, and their power and connections is a self propelling engine for WOM. Once PWOM can be ignite, it will be a strong convincing force, as being a trustful source of information, and the only form of advertising that is able to reduce perceived risk. In some cases, even NWOM is better than no WOM at all [[20] p.3], as it could, for example, cause curiosity.

There are many types of actions that can be adopted by the company to facilitate WOM. Getting mavens to try the company's products, convincing opinion leaders to talk about the products, promoting and incentivizing early adopters, offering product samples and conducting demonstrations in public places, opening the company's doors to the customers and the general audience, gathering and distributing testimonials, blogging honestly about the company, keeping negative comments on the website and trying to solve the problems and discuss them openly, training the entire staff into understanding and acting towards WOM goals, are all actions at hand for every company that are meant to encourage WOM [[1]p. 53-54], [[13] p.9].

There are difficulties as well. WOM is seen by some as a manipulating type of marketing, where marketers "bribe" opinion leaders to promote their products [[13] p.11]. Marketers could easily turn viral marketing into SPAM, if they do not act in absolute fairness. The extreme complexity, the lack of control, the strong influence of human behavior and uniqueness of individual personalities are sources of difficulties when considering WOM, at both academic and practitioner levels. While

eWOM offers more possibilities for measurement, measuring WOM, calculating ROI for WOM is still seen as a very challenging task. Although there are some techniques, among which NPS – Net Promoter Scoring, that is used to measure the possibility of initiators to recommend a brand or product, the method received a lot of criticism as it is only capturing WOM from a limited and narrow point of view. Other methods are being proposed, but not one has risen to receive greater acceptance [[1] p.38], [[6] p.8], [[18] p.2].

8. Conclusion

Some authors say that one individual can offer his attention to approximately 40 products or services at a given period of time. Advertising can influence which products or services get on that list, past experiences will also put products and service on the list. Bad products can also be on the same list [[1] p.16,19,21]. For the individual, these 40 products and services are the subjects of WOM. It takes time and effort for the company to get on the list. It is a progressive effort, an iterative, adaptive effort, a trial and error and then succeed type of effort. Experimentation is essential [[19] p.4,15,19]. WOM offers the advantage that any company could try to use it, but not every company will achieve WOM, or more specifically, PWOM. WOM takes the company and their products and services into consumers' everyday life, so the company should be extremely grateful if they reach this level of honor. It would mean that the company offered them enough to drive them to talk about it in the everyday life.

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