

# WORD-OF-MOUTH IN CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING: AN AGENDA FOR RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

The importance of word-of-mouth is well documented in the consumer behavior literature. It has been identified as a primary source of informational influence in consumer prepurchase decision making as well as a vehicle for expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product experience. With the advent and increasing use of electronic communications among consumers, it is likely that word-of-mouth will play an even larger role in consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaining behavior processes. Despite its pervasiveness, little research has directly examined critical issues concerning the measurement of word-of-mouth or the conditions under which it exerts influence on either the giver's or receiver's future behavior. This paper examines these issues and forwards a set of propositions and an agenda for research.

## INTRODUCTION

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communications between consumers is a topic of interest in both the prepurchase and postpurchase decision-making literatures. Research into the diffusion of innovations has focused on modeling the role of WOM in product adoption at various stages of the diffusion process (see Mahajan, Mueller, and Bass 1990 for a review). WOM has also been studied as a mechanism through which consumers convey both informational and normative influences in the product evaluation and purchase intention of fellow consumers (e.g., Arndt 1967; Brown and Reingen 1987). Finally, WOM has been identified as an important postpurchase complaining option (e.g., Day 1984; Singh 1990).

Managers are particularly interested in WOM because of its impact on both customer acquisition and retention. For example, many small businesses and professional services purchase minimal advertising because most of their customers are referrals (e.g., Beltramini 1989). Practitioners may be especially sensitive to

customer communications since dissatisfied customers represent ". . . a hidden network that spreads negative messages undoing the efforts of costly customer acquisition programs." (Band 1988, p. 24).

Although WOM plays an important role in consumer prepurchase and postpurchase decision-making, research into the phenomenon has been fragmented. Importantly, relatively little attention has been directed at understanding key issues with respect to WOM measurement and the nature and conditions under which WOM exerts influence in consumer decision-making. The purpose of this paper is to identify important issues and provide an initial agenda of questions to stimulate further research into the WOM phenomenon. First, a brief review of the extant literature is provided to help position the research questions and discussion which follows.

## REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Consumer WOM refers to informal communication, both positive and negative, between consumers about characteristics of a business and/or its goods and services (Westbrook 1987). Research to date has focused heavily on determining the antecedents and consequences of WOM. Antecedents include factors which may encourage individuals to either give or seek WOM. These may be categorized into individual factors (e.g., product involvement), product-related factors (e.g., stage in the life cycle) and situational factors (e.g., time availability) (Bristol 1990). Research anchored in the satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaining behavior literature has focused on the selection of WOM as a postpurchase complaint option (Day and Landon 1977; Singh 1990). The tendency to spread negative WOM has been associated with problem severity (Richins 1983), the nature of causal attributions for the product failures (Folkes 1984), perceptions of the offending firm's responsiveness (Folkes, Koletsky, and Graham 1987) and the individual's level of social integration (Richins

1987).

WOM, and the associated social influence literature, has also examined the impact that normative and informational communication have on the behavior or behavioral intentions of the receiver (e.g., Arndt 1967; Brown and Reingen 1987) as well as their cognitive structures (Ward and Reingen 1990). The effects of communicator attributes (e.g., similarity and trustworthiness) on the nature and extent of interpersonal influence (e.g., Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989) has also been examined.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This section highlights several research issues and proposes an inventory of questions to guide the research agenda on WOM effects in consumer decision-making. Specifically, it focuses on: (1) the conceptual focus of WOM effects, (2) WOM measurement, (3) variables that might moderate WOM influence, (4) complaint handling and WOM, and (5) WOM media effects.

#### Conceptual Focus of WOM Effects

To date, WOM research has relied heavily upon retrospective self-reports collected from the provider of the WOM (e.g., Gilly and Gelb 1982; Higie, Feick, and Price 1987; Richins 1983). The focus on the provider makes a number of critical assumptions and has important implications with respect to understanding the nature and impact of WOM on the receiver. One assumption is that the provider's evaluation of a WOM communication is equivalent to, and therefore provides an accurate assessment of, the receiver's evaluation of WOM. The validity of this assumption is interesting for two reasons. First, an important conceptual issue regarding WOM communication concerns the effect WOM may have on the purchasing behavior of the receiver. If the receiver of WOM evaluates the communication differently than what was intended by the provider, it may not influence the receiver's purchasing behavior as strongly or in the direction suggested by the provider's evaluation. Second, the receiver may have occasion to retransmit this message. This retransmission will be affected by how the receiver evaluates and categorizes the message.

Significant conceptual challenges to the stated assumption may be raised. These deal primarily with communication and comprehension processes. Because WOM is a communication process, it may be affected by all the factors which impact the comprehension of any type of communication. Problems associated with the **encoding** and **decoding** of a message, as well as **noise** in the communication channel could contribute to different evaluations of WOM by the provider and receiver. Research has frequently found that receivers decode a communication differently than what was intended by the provider (e.g., Jacoby and Hoyer 1989).

In general, comprehension processes are affected by three types of factors; message characteristics (e.g., complexity of the message), situational characteristics (e.g., number of other individuals present), and individual characteristics (e.g., gender) (Mick 1992). Each of these factors may contribute to the subjective comprehension of a WOM communication by the receiver. This discussion leads to the first question:

Q1: Is measuring the provider's evaluation of a WOM message a valid means of assessing the receiver's evaluation and subsequent behavior?

**The Impact of Providing WOM on the Provider.** While considerable effort has been expended tracing how receivers are influenced by WOM, little, if any, research has explicitly considered the impact of providing WOM on the provider. Self-perception theory (Bem 1964) suggests that if one publicly discloses his/her position, it increases commitment to that position. Sherman (1980) has shown that stating one's intention to perform a behavior increases the likelihood of performing that behavior. In the same vein, dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) implies that individuals strive to reduce inconsistent cognitions. Finally, Cialdini (1984), in summarizing the literature on commitment and consistency, observes that the public disclosure of a position has a powerful influence on future behavior. This implies that giving WOM may have some impact on assessments of satisfaction and subsequent behavior. This leads to the next question:

Q2: How does giving WOM impact the provider's assessments of satisfaction and repurchase behavior?

### Measurement Issues

The importance of developing valid measures for conducting research has been emphasized by many marketing scholars (e.g., Peter 1981). Current research conducted in WOM has not developed an instrument for measurement that is widely used or validated. This section of the paper focuses on two important areas related to the measurement of WOM: when the measurement should take place and whether the measurement process itself has any effect(s) on subsequent decision-making processes.

**Timing of WOM Measurement.** A critical assumption associated with WOM research is that the measurement of WOM is not affected by memory loss or enhancement. Thus, the timing of the measurement of WOM is not important. Consequently, there is no explicit consideration of whether the measurement of an individual's WOM varies depending on how closely the measurement follows the product experience in question. This assumption may also be extended to the receiver. Since WOM is often acted upon some time after it is received, it may be important to consider how memory and related issues impact receiver's evaluation of WOM.

There are a number of factors that may affect the accessibility in memory of a prior cognition. Three of these factors which may be important for understanding WOM measurement are: the length of time since the most recent activation of that cognition (Brown and Beltramini 1989), the amount of interfering material in the same general content domain (Feldman and Lynch 1988), and characteristics of the information itself, such as its vividness (Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991). Each of these factors could contribute to problems in the recollection of a product experience (in the case of the giver) or the details of a WOM message (in the case of the receiver). This leads to the next two research questions:

Q3: Will the measure of a giver's evaluation of a WOM communication be stable

over time?

Q4: Will the measure of a receiver's evaluation of a WOM communication be stable over time?

Questions have also surfaced regarding possible systematic ways in which information is distorted over time. For example, a relationship has been observed between the level of measured satisfaction and the timing of measurement (Peterson and Wilson 1992). In a repeated-measures study, Peterson and Wilson found a 20 percent decline in satisfaction ratings over a 60-day time period. One possible cause they suggested was that when initial measures are high (near the extremes of the scale), there may be a regression-toward-the-mean effect in operation.

Such a regression effect may also be important in understanding how receivers evaluate WOM communications. Because much WOM information is not used until a future event requires it (e.g., recall information about a restaurant when considering where to have dinner), it is possible that memory loss or distortion (e.g., "I think he said it was pretty good") could create a less confident recollection, which may be manifested as a regression effect. This leads to the next two questions:

Q5: Will the valence of a giver's WOM systematically regress-to-the-mean over time?

Q6: Will the valence of a receiver's evaluation of a message systematically regress-to-the-mean over time?

**Measurement Effects and WOM.** Three important dependent variables in postpurchase research are satisfaction, repurchase intention and WOM (e.g., Bitner 1990). Recent interest in measurement effects on belief, attitude, intention and behavior have implications for the assessment of these postpurchase variables. In general, it is suggested that respondents answers to prior questions in a survey may be used as inputs into, and have disproportionate influence over, responses to later, related questions (see Feldman and Lynch 1988 for a complete review of this literature). Since WOM may be measured in

concert with, or immediately after satisfaction and repurchase intention, chances increase that these variable will be retrieved and guide judgments of WOM. Further, Alba and Chattopadhyay (1985) note that, through the process of output interference, cognitions used in making the initial judgment (i.e., satisfaction) may suppress the retrieval of information which might influence the second judgment (i.e., WOM). This leads to the next question:

**Q7:** How is the measurement of WOM influenced by the immediate prior measurement of satisfaction and/or repurchase intentions?

One way to overcome the effects of prior measurement of satisfaction and/or repurchase intentions on WOM is to measure WOM first. This, however, raises the issues discussed in Q2 and highlights Morwitz, Johnson, and Schmittlein's (1993) finding that the mere act of measuring intention to perform a certain behavior can subsequently alter the behavior. It also has implications for the validity of satisfaction and repurchase intention measurement which follow WOM.

### Moderating Effects of WOM Influence

**Role of Prior Experience.** WOM research has traditionally focused on product innovations and services, either personal or professional. Consumers learn about these products and services predominately through WOM. However, because much consumer communication concerns existing and frequently used products, it is important to understand how WOM impacts decision-making under conditions of prior experience. That is, will WOM be influential if the receiver has prior experience with the product in question?

Research has found that individuals whose attitudes are based on direct experience may hold those attitudes with greater certainty than individuals whose attitudes are based on indirect experience, such as WOM (Fazio and Zanna 1981). WOM recommendations have also been found to have less influence on product judgments when extremely negative attribute information (e.g., from *Consumer Reports*) is available (Herr,

Kardes, and Kim 1991). In the satisfaction literature, Oliva, Oliver, and Macmillan (1992) have observed that a dissatisfying product experience must be extreme to dislodge a loyal customer under high involvement. One might expect that it would be even less likely that negative WOM could dislodge a loyal customer of a service. This leads to the following question:

**Q8:** How will WOM influence purchase decisions when the receiver has prior product experience?

**Role of WOM Diagnosticity.** A second variable that is likely to moderate the effects of WOM is the diagnosticity of the WOM information. Information is considered diagnostic if it allows a consumer to categorize a product into one and only one cognitive category (Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991). Extremely diagnostic information (e.g., the owner of a restaurant one likes is the leader of a racist organization) tends to have strong influence. This leads to the next question:

**Q9:** Does the diagnosticity of WOM information moderate its influence?

**WOM Source and Frequency.** Source characteristics have been the focus of research in a number of social influence studies (e.g., Childers and Rao 1992). In general, when the source has a strong normative influence over the receiver, greater influence may be achieved (Bearden and Etzel 1982).

In addition to source effects, frequency of WOM information is likely to moderate WOM effects. It follows from Oliva, Oliver, and Macmillan (1992) that frequent and consistent occurrences of WOM might impact consumer decision-making, whereas a single instance is unlikely to influence a loyal customer. In addition to a potential main effect of frequency of occurrence, it is likely that in the face of prior favorable experience more frequent WOM will be necessary to impact repurchase intention compared to situations when prior experience is limited. This raises the question:

**Q10:** Does frequency of occurrence

moderate the impact of WOM?

### Complaint Handling and WOM

While WOM has mostly been linked to "initial" satisfaction with goods and services, more recent interest has focused on the relationship between complaint handling and WOM behavior (e.g., Blodgett and Granbois 1992; Tax and Chandrashekar 1992). Westbrook (1987) found that positive and negative dimensions of affect are independently and positively related to frequency of WOM. Further, he observed that more exceptional experiences (those involving stronger affective elements) may lead to greater WOM frequency. This suggests that to the extent complaint handling contributes strongly to either positive or negative affect, it will lead to a higher incidence of WOM. This leads to the question:

Q11: Does the manner in which a complaint is handled influence the likelihood of WOM?

Complaint handling may also be examined in terms of its influence on the valence of WOM transmission. Since the complaint handling process is likely to contribute either positive (if well handled) or negative (if poorly handled) affect to an experience, it should influence the nature of WOM communication. A factor which may moderate the impact of complaint handling on WOM is what is commonly referred to as the "negativity bias." Simply stated, the negativity bias predicts that unfavorable product-related information has a stronger influence on consumer decision-making than positive information (e.g., Arndt 1967; Kanouse 1984). Research summarized in Kanouse (1984) suggests that consumers find negative information less ambiguous and easier to recall. This line of reasoning argues that an initial failed product experience would have more weight than a well-handled complaint in both the giver's encoding and the receiver's decoding of a WOM message. However, there is evidence that when firms respond effectively to unsatisfactory service encounters it can cause the customer to remember the event favorably and increase the likelihood of repurchase (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990; Gilly and Gelb 1982). This leads to the next

question:

Q12: How does the manner in which a complaint is handled impact the valence of WOM?

### WOM Media Affects

Traditionally, WOM research has focused on face-to-face communications. However, with the introduction of computer-based electronic billboards and software programs such as Prodigy®, it is important to consider how the use of alternative media influence the impact of WOM. One important aspect of understanding the impact of information is its richness (Daft and Lengel 1984). Richness is defined as the potential information-carrying capacity of data. If the communicating of an item of data, such as a smile, adds considerable understanding, then it would be considered rich. Rich data, in general, tends to be more influential.

Lengel (1983) argues that the media used to communicate information, in large part, determines its richness. Further, he argues that face-to-face communication is the richest because it allows for immediate feedback and clarification, observation of multiple cues (e.g., facial and body language; tone of voice) and is more personal. Electronic media are considered quite low on the richness continuum. While this research was conducted in an organizational setting, it may be quite relevant to consumer WOM. This leads to the last question:

Q13: How does the type of media employed affect the impact of WOM?

### CONCLUSION

The central role of WOM in consumer postpurchase behavior, as well as its influence on consumer decision-making in general, make WOM an important phenomenon worthy of greater research effort. The purpose of this paper was to identify a number of broad questions to serve as direction for further study. The importance of WOM to both customer acquisition and retention programs makes the subject extremely relevant to managers.

One area highlighted early in the paper related to the conceptual focus of WOM measurement. Specifically, it was offered that more attention needs to be devoted to identifying the problems or limitations of measuring the giver when the behavior of the receiver of WOM is of focal interest. This is central to advancements in the understanding of WOM influence on consumer behavior.

The timing of WOM measurement was similarly identified as a research priority. The increasing interest in the role of emotion and affect in the satisfaction literature suggests that timing issues may be very salient in developing valid assessments of WOM.

Questions with respect to the concurrent measurement of WOM, satisfaction, and repurchase intention were also considered. It was suggested that more work needs to be done investigating measurement effects in modelling postpurchase decision-making.

A number of potential moderators of WOM influence on receivers were identified. Notably, it was observed that the frequency and diagnosticity of WOM information, as well as the amount and nature of prior experience, might affect the impact of WOM. Further research is needed into the conditions under which WOM is most powerful.

The influence of providing WOM on the giver has been mostly ignored in the consumer satisfaction and complaining behavior literature. While interesting as a conceptual issue, it may even have a higher priority in practitioner-oriented research, because of its direct implications on customer retention.

The impact of complaint handling on WOM valence and likelihood has also received relatively little attention. These relationships are particularly relevant to determining levels of investment in complaint resolution. WOM media issues are also important in this regard. The advent of electronic billboards means that dissatisfied consumers can instantly communicate their displeasure with thousands of potential customers.

In addition to the above, practitioners will gain from achieving a greater awareness of the conditions under which WOM is most salient. The ability for practitioners to possibly manipulate the timing of WOM (i.e., bring a friend into the restaurant within the next week and receive some

discount) contributes to the need for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon.

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