

Online social media as a driver of buzz marketing: who's riding?

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Abstract:

'Buzz Marketing' has been a considered as an alternative strategy of creating preference and demand among prospective customers by the theoreticians and practitioners for times past. Though given caution, this geometrically progressive marketing strategy offers significant opportunities for the firms. The immense popularity of the online social media among the people has given the opportunity to add a new dimension of buzz marketing, as these social networking sites are accommodating a massive exchange of views among the users. Companies planning to use these online social media as a driver of their buzz marketing efforts inevitably would face the challenge of acquiring favorable response from a versatile and almost uncontrollable mass of users. Hence, profiling the users of these media who would ride on the buzz is of utmost value for all concerned ones. This study focuses on the users of the online social media and aims to create profiles of these buzz riders. Qualitative in nature, this study also proposes some strategic implications for the different categories of online social media users to elicit positive responses of the buzz marketing efforts of the companies.

[Key words: Online social media, buzz marketing, profile, OSM users.]

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For over fifty years marketers have recognized the importance of customer orientation (Vargo & Lusch 2004). However, developing a good product that satisfies customers' needs and wants is not enough. Companies must also communicate with their present and potential customers and make them aware of the offerings available (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 1996). To communicate with customers, a firm can use the promotion mix, which consists of advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, direct marketing, public relation and publicity.

In the last years, conventional marketing strategies and marketing communication are being classified as less effective (Oosterwijk & Loeffen, 2005). Companies are not satisfied with their marketing results compared to their expenses; therefore its effectiveness is questioned (Oosterwijk & Loeffen, 2005). Consumers are paying less attention to advertising because of advertising clutter and selective perception (Oosterwijk & Loeffen, 2005). Wurman (1989) argues in his book 'Information Anxiety' that "a weekday edition of the New York Times contains more information than the average person was likely to come across in a lifetime in seventeenth-century England." Also, where we once started with less than five TV channels, new cable packages now offer hundreds of channels to choose from (Weiner, 2005). It is thus not surprising that customers are becoming more skeptical towards advertisements (Oosterwijk and Loeffen, 2005). The results of conventional mass-marketing advertising are not only decreasing but even run the risk of becoming obsolete (Weiner, 2005). However,

companies still need to generate new and repeat-sales (Oosterwijk & Loeffen, 2005). Therefore, they are in search for more reliable ways of getting attention for their brands and products (Oosterwijk & Loeffen, 2005).

- What is Buzz Marketing All About? -

Though young, the concept of buzz marketing has acquired attention of scholars from all around the discipline, mostly due to its rather 'off the track' nature. As a result, different ideas and definitions exist about buzz marketing. Greg (2004) defined buzz marketing as, "the amplification of initial marketing efforts by third parties through their passive or active influence". Whereas, Womma (2004) defined the same as: "Using high-profile entertainment or news to get people to talk about your brand". Apart from attribute based definitions, Hughes (2004) has defined buzz marketing on its functional characteristics as: "Capturing attention of consumers and the media to the point where talking about your brand becomes entertaining, fascinating, and newsworthy; A conversation starter". According to SearchCRM.com Definitions (2010), buzz marketing is a viral marketing technique that attempts to make each encounter with a consumer appear to be a unique, spontaneous personal exchange of information instead of a calculated marketing pitch choreographed by a professional advertiser. Historically, buzz marketing campaigns have been designed to be very theatrical in nature. The advertiser reveals information about the product or service to only a few "knowing" people in the target audience. By purposely seeking out one-on-one conversations with those who heavily influence their peers, buzz marketers create a sophisticated word-of-mouth campaign where consumers are flattered to be included in the elite group of those "in the know" and willingly spread the word to their friends and colleagues. By looking at the above definitions, we can form an understanding that buzz marketing is when consumers talk about the brand to other consumers. In other words, buzz

marketing is nothing but word-of-mouth communication. At this point, confusion might arise whether there is any difference between buzz marketing and word-of-mouth marketing.

- Word-of-Mouth and Buzz Marketing -

Word-of-mouth has existed since humankind; people have always talked with each other about products, issues and events that are important in their lives (Oosterwijk & Loeffen, 2005). There is a difference between word-of-mouth that results from day-to-day interaction with customers and the kind of word-of-mouth that occurs as a result of a specific campaign to create or encourage it (Womma, 2005; Riegner, 2007). If people talk about a product because they are just happy with it, this is 'organic' word-of-mouth, while 'amplified' word-of-mouth occurs when a firm tries to encourage and accelerate word-of-mouth with the launch of a campaign (Womma, 2005). From this point of view, buzz marketing is 'amplified' form of word-of-mouth that results from a firm's organized effort to make people talk about the product or brand with others. So apparently buzz marketing is not completely synonymous with word-of-mouth, rather it a form of word-of-mouth. The focus of this paper is on 'amplified' form of word-of-mouth or in other words, buzzes marketing.

- Buzz Marketing as a Tool of Marketing Promotion -

A study by the Royal Mail (2004) to determine which information sources made people 'more comfortable' with a product, found that a recommendation from a friend was at the top of the list (76%), even above the person's own past experience (68%). Word-of-mouth marketing therefore seems to be an appropriate tool to overcome advertising clutter. Although this study reveals the effect of organic word-of-mouth, it can be accelerated by 'manufactured' word-of-mouth which is referred to as buzz marketing.

“Insert Figure 1 about here”

Buzz marketing tries to capture attention of consumers and the media to the point where talking about their brand becomes entertaining, fascinating and newsworthy (Oosterwijk & Loeffen, 2005). Currently the term buzz marketing is frequently used among marketers and seems an appropriate substitute or addition to traditional marketing tools (Oosterwijk & Loeffen, 2005).

- The Online Social Media as a Driver of Buzz Marketing -

Internet social activities have presented marketers with challenges as well as opportunities to reach specific target markets. The recent most and perhaps the most popular addition in internet utilities is the Online Social Media (OSM). Although recent, scholars around the world have already contributed much in defining and characterizing OSM. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) conceptualized OSM as a set of internet applications, i.e. blogs, social networking sites, content communities, collaborative projects, virtual game worlds and social worlds that offer people the opportunity to interact with other members by creating profile sites, group communities, uploading pictures and sending instant messages. OSM enables the internet users to share, send and receive content with each other (Demopoulos, 2006). Whereas, Solis & Breakenridge (2009) perceive the OSM as a means of democratization and radicalization of the role people play in the process of reading and disseminating information through text, pictures and sound. A social networking website is defined here as "one that allows internet users the ability to add user-generated content such as: comments, feedback, ratings, or their own dedicated pages" (iProspect, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Companies are trying many different ways to attract the attention of consumers and create a successful social media strategy (Coon, 2010). According to Brennan (2010), a product

firm's OSM profile can allow customers to connect with the firm in a more direct manner than on a Website, and to connect using a social media platform that the customers are already using. Companies can increase their customers' sense of brand connection and create transparency by answering their questions on a public site to make the connection stronger. According to the Socialnomics (2009), a survey made on 880 marketers showed that the number one benefit of using social communication channels (SCC) was to generate exposure for the firm whilst the second and third was to improve traffic on the website and build new relationships.

The development of communication and information technologies has encouraged the emergence of new communication channels that have enhanced the options available to businesses for building relationships with clients (Albesa, 2007). According to Gensler, Dekimpe and Skiera (2006) more and more companies are becoming multi-channel operators, which mean that they are extending their only available online channel, the firm webpage, to reach out to a global audience. Businesses should seek a multi-channel configuration that provides "channel advantages", because each channel presents different strengths, but at the same time presents limitations and complications (Barrutia, 2002). With this easy to access and ever growing source of people, brands have begun to realize the potential to reach these people through social networks. Socialnomics (2009) found that 25% of search results for the World's Top 20 brands are links to user-generated content and 34% of bloggers post opinions about products and brands. Socialnomics (2009) found that, people care more about how their social graph ranks products and services than how Google ranks them and 78% of consumers trust peer recommendations while only 14% trust advertisements.

The communication opportunities that social media offers are tremendous as 75% of the Internet users today are using some type of social media (Gordhamer, 2009). Even though the interest for social media is huge, few companies understand what the term “social media” means. Solis & Breakenridge (2009) explain that marketers have also started to use social media in their communication strategies, what is nowadays referred to as “social media marketing”.

When a firm uses social media it is a part of their communications mix and can be performed either through a single campaign or as a part of the overall promotion strategy. The aim of this communication is to acquire new customers by building awareness and also to reinforce current customers purchase behavior by providing additional information about the brand's benefits (Ozuem, 2008; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). Companies often perceive the Internet as a channel where they can broadcast their marketing messages to millions of people according to Webber (2009). It is shown in a study conducted by Inc. Magazine that 82 % of the most rapidly expanding private companies use social media marketing according to Ferguson (2008).

Marketing through online social media allows business firms and customers to interact with each other through a multiplex of system. It not only enables the business firms to communicate with the target customers in a traditional B2C manner, but also creates scopes for customer to customer or C2C communication (Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Wellman et al, 1996). As an additional feature, it also helps building up a B2B communication that, besides competition creates additional business opportunities and cooperation among business firms working with similar objectives.

- The Online ‘Buzzers’: A Typology of Profiles -

According to level of involvement with the online social media and attitude towards the same, a typological pattern can be derived through cross-tabulation of both. This typology expresses the OSM users’ profiles that are expressed through their reaction against the online buzz communication efforts carried out by the marketers of products and services.

“Insert Table 1 about here”

On an OSM environment, the user involvement levels of three types are obviously high, medium and low. Users with these involvement levels can be termed as Enthusiast, regulars and nichers for high, medium and low level of involvements respectively. The Enthusiast users are highly regular in the OSM and are more active in participating in communications and forums. The regulars possess a general level of participation in the similar activities, but may be less participative in buzz communications than the Enthusiast users. Whereas, the nichers are either irregular in OSM and thus are often remain unexposed to many events or communications, or are highly unlikely to participate in any communication or respond to buzz efforts.

On the other hand, the OSM users, whether Enthusiast, regulars or nichers can possess different attitudes towards the OSM environment, activities and communications. These users can be clustered into three categories, namely, Optimist, Pessimist and Skeptic that are reflected through their response to the OSM environmental stimuli and perceptions. The optimist users are the ones that hold a very positive mindset towards what is happening in the OSMs. They perceive OSM as a positive addition to their social and material lives. They take most of the OSM communications as opportunities to add something better to their

experiences and knowledge, thus a means of enhancing wisdom. The optimist users are the people that respond positively to most of the OSM communications they are exposed to and they do that with zeal. These optimists are the vital initiators of buzz over the internet and might be the primary target audience for the online buzz marketers. The Pessimist users, as contrasting to optimist, usually possess a rather shabby feeling to the very OSM they are connected to. As expressed by their title, the pessimists feel less confident to rely on the authenticity and value of the OSM activities and communications. As a result of their lack of reliance on OSM environment and other users, they are less likely to express a positive response the communications from the part of the online marketers even if they are exposed to most ones. But, these pessimists are less likely to oppose any online marketing activities due to their mindset. The pessimists are more ‘viewers’ than ‘expressers’ who might respond to buzz marketing communications if they see a strong trend. The Skeptics, at the other extreme point from the optimists, are the suspecting users over the OSM. These users not only possess a negative mindset towards the OSM marketing activities and communications, but also a very strong voice focusing the actual and possible negatives of such. These rather ‘expressers’ sometimes become so antagonistic that, they use the OSM and participate in the OSM marketing forums to raise their voices and demoralize customers of the same.

However, putting the aforementioned two attributes of types of the OSM users on the same table, nine distinct clusters of these buzz riders can be identified who have different expectations and potential as targets for OSM buss marketing. The optimistic OSM users can be categorized into three groups according to their level of involvement with the system. The high involvement (enthusiasts) optimistic users are the ‘Advocates’ who are extremely regular and loyal to the OSM activities. These users not only participate in OSM activities and respond to the marketing communications positively, but also are front-liners in referring

the OSM marketing to other users. In fact, they act as the community builders who make the job of OSM buzz marketers easier. The medium involvement (regulars) optimistic OSM users form the 'Voicers' group who are less positive about responding to marketing communications but are very regular in OSM discussions. These users act as the voice of the OSM user community by regularly expressing their thoughts and analysis about the online marketing efforts made by the marketers. Their discussions create a healthy flow of communication among the users, which in turn, enhances the reach and exposure of buzz communication among the OSM user community. The low involvement (nichers) optimistic users form a rather unique group that can be termed as 'Listeners' who are less regular in participation in OSM activities and less positive about responding to OSM marketing communications. These silent users seldom raise their voices, but are very keen to keep aware of the events going over the OSM communities. These users can turn into voicers if they find issues of their interests over the OSM. But, there is also possibility for these users to become pessimists due to their alienated presence in the OSM communities.

Among the first of the three pessimist OSM users, first comes the 'Analysts' group. These high involvement (enthusiasts) pessimists are diehard analysts of the events going over the OSM. They are extremely committed to express their threadbare discussions over the OSM events, especially the marketing communications, though sometimes criticizing. Less likely to respond to OSM marketing communications, these users serve as the early warning system for the OSM marketers through raising flags about any ill positioned communication from the business end. The second group is the 'Debaters' that comprises of the medium involvement (regulars) pessimists. These users are committed to raising questions on whatever communications they are exposed to. They continuously look for issues to debate with the other OSM users and marketers. If left untreated, they can turn into skeptics and raise

significant obstacles for the OSM marketers. The last group of pessimists comprises the ‘Laggards’ that encompasses the low involvement (nichers) users. These extremely irregular OSM users are the last ones to respond to any communications or marketing stimuli that they become exposed to. They are the most alienated users of OSM and are perhaps the most unattractive targets for the OSM buzz marketers.

The high involvement (enthusiast) skeptics form the ‘Antagonists’ group who are the strongest voice against the OSM marketing efforts. They feel motivated to spread negative messages over the OSM communities about the OSM marketing and raise questions about the sanctity of the intentions of the OSM marketers. On an extreme point, they become de-marketers for any initiative performed over the OSM to promote market offers. The less extreme group that is consisted of the medium involvement (regulars) skeptic OSM users construct the ‘Opposers’ group who are committed to resist communications targeted towards them by the marketers. They are less likely to become de-marketers but can significantly create obstacles for the success of OSM buzz marketing initiatives. The last and most ‘out of track’ users are the ‘Aloofs’ who are constructed by low involvement (nichers) skeptics. These users feel so less confident about the OSM effectiveness that, they overlook almost any communications diverted towards them, whether from other users or the marketers. These aloof users hardly contribute anything, positive or negative, to the events and efforts taking place over the OSM.

- Riders of OSM Buzz – Strategic Implications for the Marketers -

The OSM sites have come to exert significant influence on the consumer preferences towards any product. These online networks offer a number of advantages for the marketers in comparison to traditional media. Shahriar & Taufique (2010) have identified a number of

relative advantages of OSM in promoting market offers, namely *Better Accessibility and Reach, Sufficient Information through User Generated Contents, Reliability, Verifiability, Currency, Flexibility, Better Interactivity and Larger User Base*. Due to these advantages of the OSM, marketers are increasingly resorting to them to elicit and secure favorable consumer attitude and preferences towards their marketing communications. According to a recent study, 81 percent of all marketers surveyed said their social media efforts have generated sustainable exposure to their business (Swink, 2010). Actualizing success in OSM based buzz marketing requires the communications over the media to be flexible and responsive to rapid changes in the market environment as well as be stable and responsible to provide value to the existing customer base. The marketers must capture the seemingly infinite opportunities offered by the OSM to create a fruitful buzz in favor of what they are offering to the target consumers, regardless to whatever typologies they belong to.

“Insert Figure 2 about here”

In the quest to perform a favorable and effective OSM based buzz marketing, the first and foremost task for the marketers is to search out the target customers’ interests and preference of social networking sites to narrow down the number of sites to intervene. After selecting the sites, the marketers should create user appreciation groups for their organizations and products they are promoting. They should design attractive, visual and informative pages for these groups which attracts users and enables them to find what they are looking for. The efforts are to be focused on increasing visitors and maximizing participation by the online communities. The viewers must therefore, be encouraged and motivated to post any information, pictures, videos etc. relevant to their experience and opinion towards the products and the firm, and thus initiate the buzz among the OSM users. Once the initial buzz

has been created, the marketers then have to amplify and divert it towards a favorable and sustainable positioning of their marketing offers. Regularly updating the contents, appearance, design and other features would retain the groups' members. The marketers can also launch contests and special offers in their social network pages to provide the visitors and contributors some extra value. These types of sweepstakes are extremely effective in increasing visitors to the sites and boost up the motivations of the active users (Shahriar & Taufique, 2010). At an extreme point of buzz marketing initiative, the marketers can establish their own blog or social networking sites to command their place in the OSM community. The marketers, through the active participation and contribution of the members, can amplify the buzz through user to user discussions and referrals.

The biggest marketing implication of the OSM user typologies is to manage the different types of users and ensuring sufficient feedback from the target users. Based on the types of users, there are strategic implications for the marketers that would be reflected in the user management and opinion management strategies implemented over the OSM.

“Insert Table 2 about here”

For the high involvement user groups, keeping the opinions on track and in favor is of utmost importance. As their characteristics imply, these users are self-motivated opinion leaders among the OSM communities. As a result, they create the biggest chunk of the buzz and are the pioneers of the buzzing trend. The first two enthusiasts namely, the advocates and the analysts generate the largest flow of information and communication about the firms and their offers. The task of the marketers here is to enhance positivism among these users through direct sound information and flawless communication towards them. The antagonists

have to be dealt with similar involvement from the part of the marketers. Participating in discussions generated by the antagonists and focusing positive information among the discussants would not only pacify the antagonism, but also can turn these diehards into analysts, or even advocates, if convinced sufficiently. For the medium involvement OSM user groups, voicers, debaters and opposers successively, strong and continuous reinforcement of the online marketing communications are to be done from the part of the marketers. As voicers and debaters are less extreme in their beliefs and opinions, they are relatively easy to motivate towards favorable preference for the firms market offers. The opposers on the other hand, are not so convenient to convince, as their profile implies. Even though, they can be neutralized or made favorable towards the firm's offers through well planned communication programs that focus upon empirically proven information on the performance of the firm and its offers. These regulars can also be utilized as the carriers of the buzz communications throughout the OSM environment. Success upon winning over these user groups through sound communication and flawless performance can become hallmarks for the online buzz marketers in sustaining and extending their efforts and also motivate the low involvement groups to become involved to the OSM buzz activities to a greater extent. The low involvement user groups, namely the listeners, laggards and the aloofs are generally the unattractive targets for the marketers due to their alienation from the OSM activities. But still these groups deserve efforts from the part of the marketers. The listeners and laggards are the silent audience who can serve as the generator of future high or medium involvement users if contacted with specially targeted campaigns. The aloofs, however, bears the least prospect to become worthy for buzz marketing. However, these user groups are to be kept under surveillance to communicate in times of shifts in their collective attitude towards OSM activities.

- The Points to Ponder Upon -

The unconventional nature of OSM based buzz marketing erects a number of issues that can pose challenges that evolves from the very advantages it offers (Shahriar & Taufique, 2010). Ensuring effective reach and exposure of communication efforts among the targeted OSM users is the first and foremost challenge to be faced by the marketers. Accommodating and directing sufficient information towards the OSM users is also a great challenge for the marketers. Reliability is a constant challenge for the marketers on the OSM. The marketers must convince the visitors about the reliability, trustworthiness and factuality of the information posted on their groups, better if with empirical evidences. Ensuring participation of all the prospective users is also a significant challenge for the buzz marketing initiatives made by the marketers. Without active participation of users, these initiatives would not be strong enough to create an effective buzz, thus secure positive preference of the target market. Interactivity and convenience of the users must also be ensured in the OSM sites intervened by the marketers so that sufficient and spontaneous creation and exchange of information takes place among the users, which would amplify the buzz and ensure its sustainability. Managing opinions given in the sites are mostly out of control of the marketers but have significant impact on user attitudes and preferences. The marketers, hence, should constantly keep trying to encourage the contributors to post positive opinions through providing them with better services. The other mentionable challenges for the marketers are to increase the participation level of the visitors and contributors, periodically updating the contents and information on the pages and devising newer ways to attract and retain visitors to their online communities. These challenges that must be met properly or else buzz marketing can rather become an online runaway train that would go nowhere else than disgrace for the firms and their offers.

- The Concluding Remarks -

The online social media is a phenomenon that is radicalizing throughout the globe, the way people communicate and socialize. Alongside its facilities for the individuals, the OSM is also offering endless opportunities for the business enterprises of today. Buzz marketing through the OSM is just another means of marketing communications that today's marketers can take advantage of, among the many other ways of manipulating the rapidly growing OSM. A number of advantages of OSM for being the driver of buzz marketing are expected to attract a mass of firms to crowd the virtual marketplace; nevertheless, they would be faced with the everlasting challenges that make this alternative marketing practice a business for the fittest ones. Most evidently, as this study reveals, the OSM users create the most attractive opportunities for the online buzz marketers. But at the same time, these almost unpredictable and uncontrollable mass of users pose the toughest hurdles for the same. Buzz marketing through OSM, therefore, is a delicate engagement for the futuristic marketers that, considering the influence and significance of the OSM users, can be successfully managed through intensive involvement with the very OSM that would be intervened into.

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Annex A: Figures

FIGURE 1: CUSTOMERS’ PERCEIVED RELIABILITY AND IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION SOURCES (SOURCE: ROYAL MAIL, APRIL 2004)

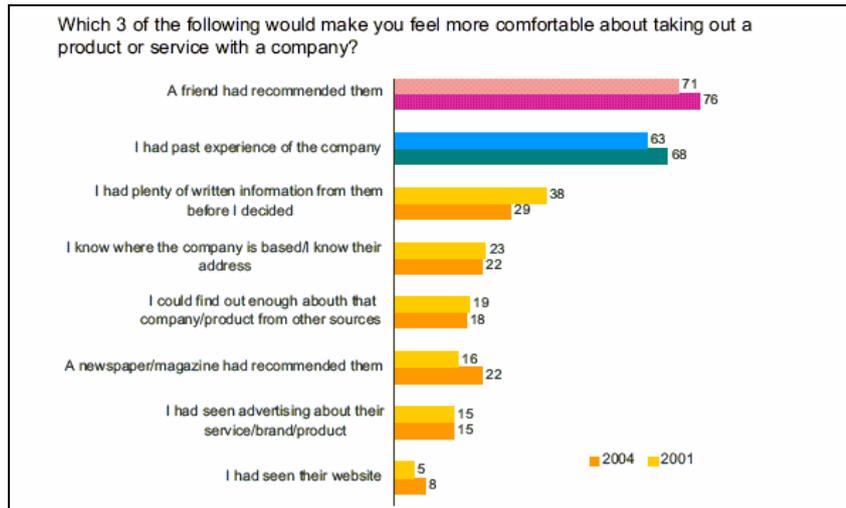
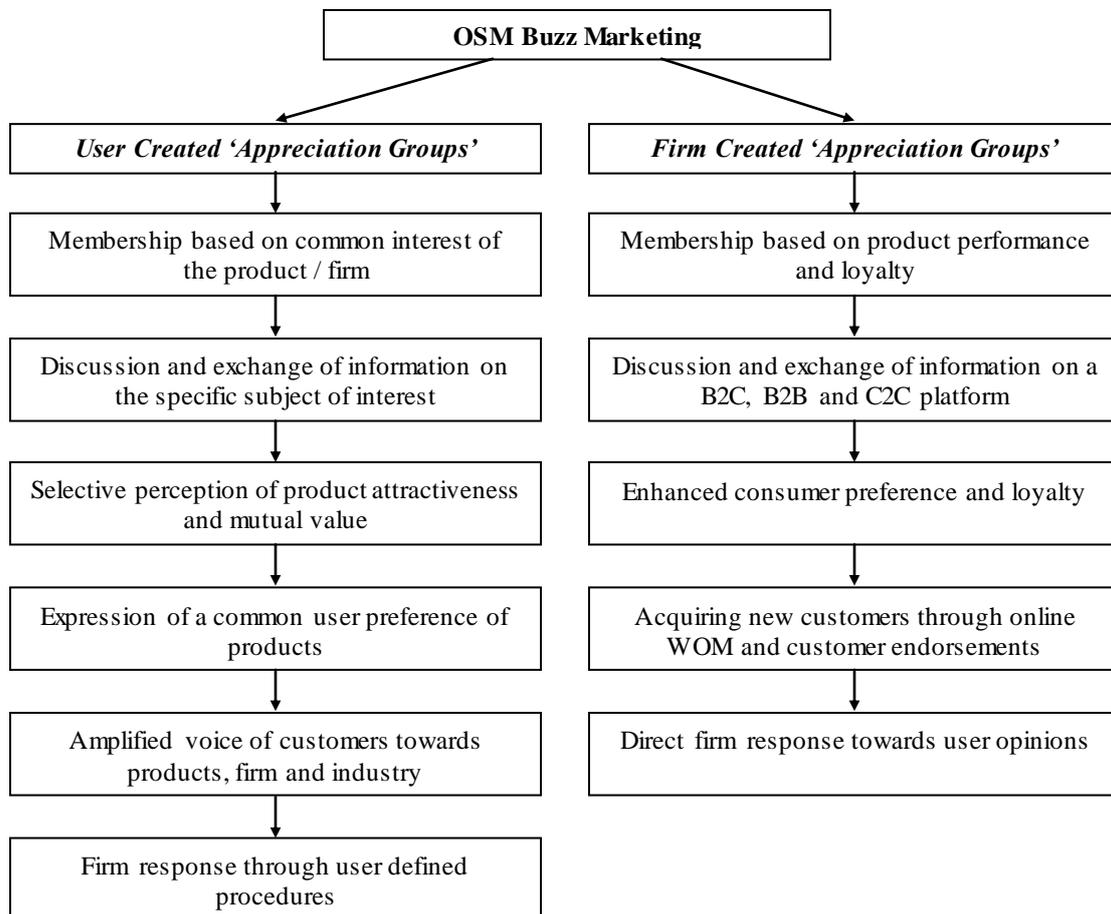


FIGURE 2: MARKETING IMPLICATIONS FOR OSM BASED BUZZ MARKETING (DEVELOPED BY AUTHORS)



Annex B: Tables

TABLE 1: TYPOLOGY OF OSM USERS (DEVELOPED BY AUTHORS)

Involvement Attitude	High (Enthusiasts)	Medium (Regulars)	Low (Nicheurs)
Optimists	Advocates	Voicers	Listeners
Pessimists	Analysts	Debaters	Laggards
Skeptics	Antagonists	Opposers	Aloofs

TABLE 2: MARKETING IMPLICATIONS FOR BUZZ MARKETING BASED ON THE TYPOLOGY OF OSM USERS (DEVELOPED BY AUTHORS)

Typology	Roll in OSM Buzz	Implications for the Marketers
Advocates	Promoter of the OSM buzz	To utilize for 'Buzz' creation
Analysts	Frequent posing and discussion	To utilize for 'Buzz' creation
Antagonists	Hardcore critique of OSM Marketing	To neutralize/pacify through empirical evidences
Voicers	Organizers of voices	To elicit positive discussion
Debaters	Question raisers on OSM related issues	To provide with empirical evidences
Opposers	Resistors of OSM marketing efforts	To communicate with targeted campaigns
Listeners	Frequent visit without posting	To motivate to post regularly
Laggards	Infrequent posting	To motivate to post opinions
Aloofs	Infrequent visit	To motivate to visit frequently