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It's as important to know what word of mouth marketing IS as what it ISN'T. Word-of-Mouth (W-O-M) is about involving, educating and satisfying customers. It isn't about abandoning your marketing plan and advertising campaign. It isn't enough to simply provide good customer service and wait for the buzz to build. Let's test your knowledge of W-O-M with this simple quiz. Select the most suitable answer to the following questions. Answers are at the end of the article.

### WHAT IS WORD-OF-MOUTH MARKETING?

1. Great Word-of-Mouth is
  - a. an art
  - b. a science
  - c. a matter of chance
2. The leading form of communication is
  - a. Word-of-Mouth
  - b. print media
  - c. the Internet
3. The most influential factor in your business is
  - a. a marketing consultant
  - b. memorable advertising
  - c. an educated consumer
4. You can involve customers by
  - a. seeking their opinions and input
  - b. soliciting testimonials
  - c. sending gifts as incentives
5. Word-of-Mouth is primarily controlled by
  - a. your sales force
  - b. your competition
  - c. you
6. Promotional success results from
  - a. a combination of marketing efforts
  - b. high visibility advertising
  - c. a strong marketing plan
7. The most effective technique for handling negative Word-of-Mouth is

- a. an immediate response
- b. an accurate response
- c. putting the right spin on it

8. Your Word-of-Mouth marketing and your advertising should be

- a. consistent
- b. collaborative
- c. competitive

9. Customers are most likely to spread the word about your business if

- a. they're happy with your service
- b. anyone happens to ask
- c. they're dissatisfied

10. A referred customer will probably

- a. pass along the recommendation to others
- b. approach you warily
- c. expect a price break

Word-of-Mouth doesn't just happen. You have to generate it yourself. Too many entrepreneurs believe that simply providing an excellent product or service is enough to catapult people to their door. Marketing plans based on W-O-M require an understanding of the "science" of purchasing decisions. Think about a business that you yourself have recommended and consider what aspects inspired this endorsement.

People tend to share their disappointment rather than their satisfaction. Your customers are no different. Although great customer service can't hurt your business, it is more likely to decrease negative W-O-M than significantly increase positive W-O-M.

Always respond immediately to negative Word-of-Mouth. Determine whether the slander was cast by an unreasonable customer or a competitor and respond calmly with a solid point-by-point defense. When customers come to you with a complaint, do what you can to send them away happy. Negative feelings occur in a heartbeat, but can linger for years if you do not deal with them immediately. Let your customers know that they can bring their complaints to you.

Involvement is a simple and effective way to build W-O-M. Involve your customers by providing them with valuable information about the quality of your product/service. You can offer a tour (either in person or on video) of your production facility to the public and clients. At the retail level, offer hands-on demonstrations of how your product/service works, explaining the benefits and providing tips on maintenance and service. Some manufacturers invite customers to participate on a product review panel.

Build W-O-M through testimonials. Testimonials are easy to understand and relate to and they allow prospects to visualize using your product. You can solicit formal letters, or--if you overhear a passing compliment or recommendation from a customer--request permission to

quote them in your next ad or newsletter. Always get authorization before using the quotations and maintain a file in case you need to verify the source.

An often overlooked aspect of W-O-M is the way you treat your employees, suppliers, friends and acquaintances. Your ability to inspire trust will be communicated to your customers and prospects. Your policies and practices publicize that belief. Sales representatives, wholesalers, distributors, vendors, creditors, consultants, and industry experts also contribute to your reputation. Don't be afraid to use their influence. Provide them with the ammo to fire up your sales. Let them know that you build quality into your work. Tell stories of successful customers.

Where can you find inspirational stories? Ask your staff to collect customer interactions that depict your company's honesty and integrity. Share these stories at staff meetings. Use them generously in brochures, newspaper, radio and television advertising, direct mail pieces, newsletters and personal correspondence with customers.

Finally, promotional success will result from a combination of marketing efforts. In "Guerrilla Marketing for the 90's," Jay Levinson cautions that what appears to be Word of Mouth advertising, "is often a combination of newspaper, magazine, radio, direct-mail, and Word-of-Mouth."

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Quiz Answers: 1b 2a 3c 4a 5c 6a 7a 8b 9c 10a