

Exploring the Message Characteristics of Word-of-Mouth: A Study in a Services Context

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Abstract

Organizations are continually striving for new ways to achieve and retain a competitive edge while, simultaneously, customers are becoming increasingly discerning and demanding and have more choice. Further, recent research has shown consumers are less attentive to traditional advertising (Urban, 2004; McDonnell, 2005), leading many organisations to reduce advertising expenditure. In this context, word-of-mouth (WOM) provides a new approach to marketing communication (First International Conference on Word-of-Mouth, 2005). WOM is not a new idea. Indeed, over forty years ago, Dichter (1966) discussed motivations for WOM ‘speakers’ and ‘listeners’. Despite a recent surge in interest in WOM, there has been very little empirical research into the message style itself. The study offers a new perspective on WOM measurement and offers suggestions for future research, as well as practical implications for service providers.

Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has a significant effect on consumer behaviour and both Bass (1969) and Moore (1995) suggested it was the most important factor influencing sales growth. Arndt (1967, p. 3) described WOM as “oral person to person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, a product or a service”. WOM, if positive, is effective for several reasons. First, it is customised, as the informer portrays the information in a relevant way to the recipient. Second, it saves the recipient time and money in identifying appropriate information. Third, at least if offered through informal sources, it is seen as independent, as the informer has no vested interest in the sale of the service, which adds to its credibility. Indeed, given its non-commercial nature, WOM communication is viewed with less scepticism than firm-initiated promotional efforts (Herr et al., 1991).

Despite the recognition of WOM as an important means of communication, very little research has examined the composition of WOM messages, although the salience of WOM message content for specific messages has been raised in recent research. Eliashberg et al. (2000), for example, noted its importance, but viewed it as unnecessary to address the range of effectiveness of WOM messages and argued this was “reasonable” for low involvement products, while Godes and Mayzlin (2004) noted the content of a WOM conversation was likely to be an important influence, but did not address this issue in their study due to the size of their data set and cost implications. Focusing on the content more explicitly, Gremler (1994) suggested messages have more impact when delivered enthusiastically. Further, it seems that the power of message delivery may impact on people’s ability to recall WOM (Gremler, 1994; Herr et al., 1991). The present study takes this theme a step forward by explicitly examining WOM message characteristics.

A second gap in previous WOM research is that WOM conceptualizations have tended to be simplistic. Measures have typically focused on the extent or frequency of WOM behavior (e.g., Gremler and Brown, 1999; Hartline and Jones, 1996; Westbrook, 1987) or the likelihood that people will engage in WOM, often measuring such an outcome through a single item (e.g., Hartline and Jones, 1996; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Moreover, much research, especially in the services domain, has used the WOM construct in an incidental way to test the behavioral outcomes of a consumer evaluation model of, for example, service

quality (e.g., Hartline and Jones, 1996; Parasuraman et al., 1988), rather than focusing on WOM per se.

Harrison-Walker (2001), recognizing weaknesses in previous WOM measures and consistent with the present discussion, developed a two-dimensional WOM measure (WOM activity, in line with previous research, and WOM praise that addressed the positive or negative valence of such messages and the extent of such a valence). This was a commendable step that enhanced our understanding of how WOM operates. Harrison-Walker's (2001) measure was developed as a *general* measure of WOM activity and a *general* measure of WOM praise that was designed to measure perceptions of cumulative WOM across time. While this gives an overall view of WOM giving, it is also important to address a particular incident in which WOM is given or received as such WOM incidents are the basic building blocks of WOM activity. That is, a series of incidents of WOM giving constitutes the general activity of WOM giving. Consequently, the WOM incident was the unit of analysis used in the present study, as is discussed in the next section.

The importance of understanding the specifics of individual WOM messages is supported in Mason and Davis's (2007) stance analysis of online focus groups; a stance representing different aspects of the way speakers position themselves vis-à-vis other communicators in an interaction. Mazzarol, Sweeney and Soutar (2007) and Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzarol (2008) pursued Anderson's (1998) conceptualization of WOM as a rich construct and Harrison-Walker's investigation into this aspect of the WOM construct. They investigated some of the core characteristics of incident specific WOM messages from both a giver's and receiver's perspective and found two key dimensions underlay such messages, which they termed the "richness of message" and the "strength of implied or explicit advocacy". The present research seeks to measure such descriptions quantitatively through the development of a WOM delivery scale.

The present study concentrated on WOM from a giver's perspective in a services context. A services context was chosen as services are intangible, difficult to evaluate before purchase, not covered by guarantee and non-standardized and, hence, are often perceived as high risk (e.g. Murray, 1991), which means WOM communication is likely to be more important as it acts as a risk reliever in such situations (Ennew, Bannerjee and Li, 2000; File, Cermak and Prince, 1994).

It is also important to remember service quality and satisfaction are commonly suggested antecedents to WOM delivery (e.g., Westbrook 1987; Swan and Oliver 1989; Dabholkar, Shepherd and Thorpe, 2000). Consequently, any investigation of WOM message characteristics as facets of WOM should assess the relationship between service quality and satisfaction as antecedents to WOM and WOM message characteristics. The objectives of the present study, which is discussed in the next section, were therefore to:

- a) Extend the conceptualization of WOM beyond Harrison-Walker's (2001) measure by specifically focusing on message content.
- b) Explore the facets of incident specific WOM and develop a scale to measure incident specific WOM that has good measurement properties.

The Present Study

The prior research that has been discussed suggested there are distinct WOM aspects. The present section describes the process used to establish the content of these dimensions and to validate the scale psychometrically and theoretically. The process follows Churchill's (1979) approach for developing multiple-item marketing constructs. After the development of an initial set of items, scale purification was undertaken, as is discussed in subsequent sections.

The Development of an Initial Set of Items

The initial set of items was developed through a series of focus groups with adult consumers. Six focus groups were conducted during weekday evenings with customers and potential customers of a financial institution that was an industry partner in the project. Respondents were equally divided between the genders, were aged from 18 to 64 years and came from a wide range of occupations and education levels.

The groups were asked about giving of positive WOM in a variety of services contexts. Questions included:

- What does word of mouth mean to you?
- What motivates you to give word of mouth (WOM) information?
- Thinking of times when you have given WOM, what was the nature of this word of mouth?
- Why do you think word of mouth conversations are so well remembered for a long time afterwards?

The groups were supported by a series of critical incident technique (CIT) forms, each respondent completing a CIT form, one for positive and one for negative WOM. Respondents were asked to think of a time in the last year, when as a customer of a particular service firm (e.g. hairdresser, bank, lawyer, restaurant, hotel, car hire, retail outlet such as Myer), they felt particularly **pleased** with the firm and passed on positive comment about the firm to someone else. The types of questions asked in this case included:

- Briefly, describe what you can remember of your comment, in terms of its content, style, emotion and so on;
- How strongly would you say that you communicated your message and why?

Following the analysis of the focus group transcripts and the CIT sheets, a total of 70 WOM message characteristic statements were retained for further evaluation. Definitions of the WOM dimensions suggested by Mazzarol et al. (2007) (i.e. richness of message and strength of advocacy) were provided to seventeen academics who evaluated the items in terms of the appropriateness of the items to these definitions.

The analysis suggested important characteristics of the WOM message included aspects of message content and delivery. Message content aspects included the depth, intensity and vividness of the message itself. The language used and the degree of story telling or depth of information involved in the message, were also important in describing message richness. Delivery aspects included the strength or the power of the way in which the message was delivered. Descriptions referred to the manner in which the message is conveyed, rather than

to the content itself. As a result of this analysis, 22 items that related to the content of messages and 24 items related to delivery were retained.

Refinement and Validation

To refine the scale further, a survey that asked about positive WOM was undertaken. A total of 495 respondents were randomly selected from the member database of the industry partner and interviewed by phone. As with the CITs used earlier, respondents were asked to recall a situation in which they *gave positive WOM* about any service provider and to describe the incident in terms of the nature of the message and the way in which it was delivered. Respondents were asked about their agreement with the 46 items derived in the previous stage using a 7-point Likert-type scale. An example question was “The message I delivered was reliable”. Following the scale development procedures suggested by DeVellis (2003), exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and reliability analysis were undertaken, after which confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to further refine the scale. The results of the EFA are not shown due to space constraints, although they are available from the authors. The CFA results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Confirmatory Factor Analyses – Content and Delivery Sub-Scales

Content Sub-Scale	Loadings	Chi- square
Cognitive Content		1.88 (2df)
Reliable	0.70	
Specific	0.68	
Informative	0.74	
Clear	0.70	
Content Richness		0.35 (2df)
Reinforcing	0.66	
Intense	0.70	
Elaborate	0.76	
Explicit	0.72	
Strength of Delivery		1.45 (2df)
In a Strong Way	0.75	
In an Important Manner	0.71	
Using Strong Words	0.70	
Powerfully	0.79	

The analysis of the content items suggested two factors. The first factor represented the cognitive nature of the WOM content, such as reliable and clear information, while the second reflected the richness of the WOM content, including vivid, elaborate and reinforcing information. The third dimension is consistent with Mazzarol et al.’s (2007) exploratory analysis as the delivery items revealed a single factor, which can be termed strength of delivery (e.g., delivered with strong words or powerfully) again consistent with Mazzarol et al.’s exploratory research (2007). In all, the results support a parsimonious 12-item scale that can be used to represent the three WOM message dimensions.

The relationship of the three dimensions with service quality and satisfaction was assessed to determine their criterion related validity. The results are shown in Table 2. As can be seen from the Table, each of the WOM dimensions had a significant positive relationship with service quality, perceived value and satisfaction, as was expected, suggesting they have some validity and that the scales can be used with some confidence.

Table 2: Correlations between satisfaction, service quality and value and the WOM message dimensions

Antecedent Construct	Cognitive Content	Richness of Content	Strength of Delivery
The provider gave me good value for money	0.37	0.14	0.17
The provider had high quality service	0.26	0.34	0.27
I was satisfied with my interaction	0.44	0.23	0.20

Conclusions

While WOM is regarded as of critical importance in product communication and promotion, and a stream of research has developed to tap into its potential, no previous research has investigated the message characteristics of WOM. In this sense, prior research has implied that WOM is simply a statement and message details have been ignored.

While we suggest various individual messages about an organisation form a broader WOM output, such as that used by Harrison-Walker (2001) and others, we argue the nature of each individual message needs to be considered if WOM is to be understood as messages can be rich or flat, full of detail or summative and strongly or weakly delivered. The present study identified a parsimonious 12-item scale of WOM message characteristics that described WOM messages in terms of cognitive content, richness of the message and strength of delivery. The scale was derived from systematic and detailed interviews and critical incident forms, and refined through a judging procedure and quantitative analysis, as suggested by DeVellis (2003). The scale should be of use to practitioners, as well as to academics investigating specific WOM messages.

There are several limitations to the study as the sample in both stages was limited to the industry partner's members. Of particular interest is the fact that only positive WOM was assessed. Given the nature and wording of the scale, it may also be suitable for negative WOM. Further, the scale can potentially be used to describe a message received, as well as a message given. Finally, given the current emphasis on eWOM and, in particular, new means of communication offered by new electronic media, such as blogs and social networking sites, the applicability of the scale in these contexts needs to be assessed.

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