

## Creating Buzz: New Media Tactics Have Changed the PR and Advertising Game

by **ANGELO FERNANDO**

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**Y**ou can tell that public relations is pulling ahead of advertising as the architect of buzz. How else to explain why Google and TiVo have become such well-known brands—and verbs—in such a short period of time? Companies are investing in “viral games” and “contextual marketing” rather than primetime events. So adding a few dollops of buzz as a PR tactic can’t possibly hurt, even though some of it may be stealthy—there’s a dark art called “astroturfing” that responsible PR pros won’t touch—and experimental. You know it’s a different ballgame when sending a rubber duck to the “Live With Regis and Kelly” show creates more brand buzz for insurance company AFLAC than a press conference!

Buzz, the modern variant of gossip, is a combination of marketing communication (which is all about telling our commercial stories) and public relations (used to narrate particular angles of a story) in a highly networked world. We’re talking about a world bypassing print media for its first contact with news, where mobile phone companies handle more data traffic—essentially text messaging—than voice, and a world in which e-mail-circulated stories and chat room postings travel faster than a newsletter or a press release. Whether communicators agree with all of this or not, a whole new set of communication tools has quietly upstaged trusted old ones. You know: corporate video, the press briefing, the product launch, the employee handbook and the carefully storyboarded TV commercial.

The role of advertising is waning, points out Laura Ries, co-author of the 2002 book, “The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR.” She cites Amazon, Starbucks and Krispy Kreme as examples of companies that have leveraged PR to build their brands. “People do not necessarily believe, trust or even listen to advertising messages,” she says. Agencies have been put on notice, and some have reinvented themselves.

### CHANGING TECHNOLOGY AND ECONOMIC WORRIES

Two factors brought about this shift: a piece of technology and the struggling global economy. The little black box, often referred to as a PVR (personal video recorder), introduced TV viewers to a new form of time shifting. Advertisers saw this as a dangerous trend because viewers could “TiVo” a program—record it, skip past the commercials or stop a program in its tracks for a bathroom break. The other factor was economic. Mass marketers were looking for smaller investments in marketing to a vastly segmented audience. TV commercials were no longer cost effective. At an Association of Accredited Advertising Agents media conference this past February, Procter & Gamble’s chief marketing officer, Jim Stengel, announced that “there must be, and is, life beyond the 30-second TV spot.” He then declared that the company, which spent more than 70 percent of its US\$2.5 billion ad budget on TV in 2003, was replacing its media planning account with something called communications planning. Translated: P&G would hunt out new media venues.

In advertising circles, this shifting of tectonic plates is hard to miss as brands like Nike, Mazda, Burger King and adidas, as well as politicians, drug companies and activists look to new media venues and new tactics. Call it “The New PR,” or “Guerrilla Marketing Communication.” Companies have a taste of the infinite possibilities of marketing programs that inject passion into the near-obsolete “4Ps” model and truly involve customers. We’re talking viral marketing, communication campaigns involving text messaging, web sites and even forms of “activism” promoting an idea, motivating people or demonstrating brand values.

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“Word of mouth is the real secret weapon in building a brand,” says Ries. “But how do you get the first mouth started? The media is a great place to start. You don’t need traditional media for that.”

## CREATING BUZZ IN REAL TIME

The shift away from mainstream media—a model based on “grabbing eyeballs”—challenges marketers to create their own media, i.e., a model based on generating buzz. Take the case of an adidas campaign in Asia that eschews advertising. The ad agency designed an “event” by building a 328-foot, eight-lane track in downtown Osaka. What’s so unusual about that? The track is built on the vertical face of a skyscraper! Another one was built in Hong Kong. Extreme athletes compete in these events (timed to coincide with the Olympics) and demonstrate adidas’s campaign theme: “impossible is nothing.” Check the Impossible World Records web site at [www.adidas.com/jp/impossible](http://www.adidas.com/jp/impossible) (click on the race track on the left).

Looking for buzz means being creative even when using traditional media. In the pre-Internet days, the nearest thing to integrated marketing communications (IMC) was getting TV audiences to call a toll-free number to enter a sweepstakes. In the TiVo and SMS era, the audience gets to vote using text messaging, and then watch how its votes affect the outcome of the event. The best example of integrating the brand into the program content was Coca-Cola’s role in the TV show “American Idol.” Such “advertainment” is a brand marketer’s dream: buzz plus product placement, customer participation plus measurement. As Mark Dempster of USWeb/CKS once observed, the brand manager of the future is “like an air traffic controller...it’s all happening in real time.”


## GOING VIRAL

This new PR may sound rebellious and anarchic, but those who demand it are intensely focused on measurement, which can also happen in real time. Marketers who are looking for life beyond the 30-second commercial are monitoring clickthroughs, and the time spent on product pages.

BuzzMetrics, a company that pharmaceutical and automotive marketers turn to, tracks the “naturally occurring conversations,” aka buzz, on

message boards, blogs, review sites and gripe sites. It has tracked “passion” and “advocacy,” for instance, to see what brand attributes might breed evangelists. Mitsubishi experimented with a cliffhanger TV spot during the last U.S. Super Bowl football championship, encouraging viewers to visit a special web site ([www.seewhathappens.com](http://www.seewhathappens.com)) to see the dramatic ending of the commercial. Others are “seeding” URLs into commercials, leaving audiences to discover web sites for themselves. Such viral marketing tactics have included an odd companion web site for Burger King called Subservient Chicken (see sidebar) and long-format commercials called “Webisodes” by BMW and American Express that never see the light of day on TV.

Speaking of going viral, take the case of Ford, which unleashed two web-only commercials earlier this year for a model called the “Ka” in the U.K. One “unapproved” version for the sports model ([www.ifilm.com/viralvideo?ifilmid=2633283](http://www.ifilm.com/viralvideo?ifilmid=2633283)) depicts the car’s moon roof decapitating a cat. Yuck! But that’s exactly why the ad got passed on in true viral fashion, generating more brand awareness in weeks than other ads get in months. The tagline for the Ford SportKa is “The Ka’s evil twin.” Anyone willing to bet that Ford’s ad agency, Ogilvy & Mather, was truly ignorant of it?

If all this looks experimental, it won’t be for long. A newly formed Word Of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) has plans to make what’s now a guerilla tactic into a legitimate practice. They are working on metrics and ethics issues. The day can’t be far off when “creating buzz” is given the same attention—and budget—that brand building once received. Word of mouth is not a fuzzy medium and can be integrated into a communication plan. “PR firms are very good at building relationships,” says BuzzMetrics’ President and CEO Jonathan Carson. “A lot of the core competencies of PR play right into what is necessary for successful word-of-mouth marketing.” 



## BOOKS ON BUZZ

> “*Creating Customer Evangelists: How Loyal Customers Become a Volunteer Sales Force,*” Ben McConnell and Jackie Huba.

> “*The Anatomy of Buzz: How to Create Word-of-Mouth Marketing,*” Emanuel Rosen.

> “*Buzz: Harness the Power of Influence and Create Demand,*” Marian Salzman, Ira Matathia and Ann O’Reilly.

## VIRAL WEB SITES

Taco Bell’s talking Chihuahua ads in the late 1990s created what was then considered “buzz,” but the American Kennel Club reported a 72 percent increase in Chihuahua sales. More recently, Burger King experimented with quirky marketing through its highly talked-up web site, [www.subservientchicken.com](http://www.subservientchicken.com). In a follow-up to promote the Angus beef burger, the company introduced the faux web site, [www.AngusDiet.com](http://www.AngusDiet.com). Such work is the creation of Crispin Porter + Bogusky, an advertising agency notorious for viral marketing and creating buzz for BMW’s Mini Cooper and Molson, the Canadian beer.

## ‘ASTROTURFING’

Astroturfing, as defined by the Wikipedia, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>) is “a campaign crafted by politicians or other professionals but carefully designed to appear like the result of popular feeling rather than manipulation. The astroturfing campaign attempts to gain legitimacy by appearing to spring forth spontaneously from ‘the people.’ If the campaign is well executed, the planners hope that the public at large will believe that ‘all of these independent viewpoints could not have been faked.’”