# ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH: SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR RESTAURANTS

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***Preliminary communication***
Received 3 March 2016
Revised 25 April 2016
7 July 2016
Accepted 6 October 2016
https://doi.org/10.20867/thm.22.2.5

**Abstract**
Purpose – A great deal has been discussed about the importance of using social media in marketing communications programmes because of mistrust in marketer-generated communications and more particularly for generating electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). However, it is not clear what types and styles of communication serve better the purpose using effectively social media for generating positive e-WOM. This study is aimed at exploring the types and styles of communication that work more effectively towards that purpose.
Design – The study was conducted in Dublin, Ireland and is qualitative in nature.
Methodology – This research involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with restaurant marketers who currently use social media as part of the integrated marketing communications strategies; it also included a focus group and two sub-sequent personal interviews with restaurant consumers who actively use social media.
Approach – A thematic analysis was conducted so as to first investigate the central topics surrounding the stimulation of positive e-WOM and styles and types of communication.
Findings – Further analysis of the themes pointed to a number of practical implications which in turn led to the formulation of four (4) practical recommendations for restaurant marketers.
Originality – This is the first practical paper that looks into the content, style and type of communication for effective stimulation of e-WOM in the restaurant context.
**Keywords** Electronic Word of Mouth, Restaurant Marketing, Social media marketing, Online marketing, Marketing communications

## INTRODUCTION

Word of mouth (WOM) has been defined as "the transfer of information from one customer (or a group of customers) to another customer (or group of customers) in a way that has the potential to change their preferences, actual purchase behaviour, or the way they further interact with others" (Libai *et al.*, 2010). Hennig-Thurau *et al*. (2004, 39) defined e-WOM as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet". e-WOM takes place in a more complex technologically mediated context whereas traditional WOM occurs normally in a face-to-face or one-on-one fashion, with participants in close proximity, drawing from a wealth of social and contextual clues (King, Racherla and Bush, 2014). Kim, Seo and Schrier (2014) compared the two forms (traditional WOM and e-WOM) and found that in terms of expertise, there was no difference in perceived credibility

between these two. However, unlike traditional WOM, e-WOM communications have unprecedented scalability and speed of diffusion (Cheung and Thadani, 2012).

In the context of restaurants, WOM is thought to play a highly significant role in their marketing, as more than 80% of consumers trust WOM recommendations for services, according to research by Nielsen (Libai *et al.*, 2010). Consumers now regularly share information about restaurants through Yelp and other review communities (Fogel, 2010) like Trip Advisor and Menu Pages. Many consumers use these reviews to inform their own choices and make their purchase decisions (Fogel, 2010). It is important to clarify that the effects of WOM should never be taken for granted and that e-WOM should not be seen in isolation because research conducted by the Keller Fay Group only 7% of WOM happens online (Berger, 2013). For that reason, encouraging offline WOM should always be considered as well as part of an effective restaurant marketing communication strategy.

Insufficient research has been devoted to the electronic WOM that is taking place on social media (Bolton *et al.*, 2013). This is particularly the case when one considers that Generation Y consumers (those born between 1981 and 1999) have grown up in a digital world and are heavy users of social media (Prensky, 2001; Wesner and Miller, 2008). This dimension is deemed as significant as sociologists have long since established that social change originates from changes in cohorts of younger people (Ryder, 1965), leading to the assumption that the online social media phenomenon is here to stay.

There seems to be even less research about e-WOM concerning restaurants, with the only two previous research studies specific to the area of WOM for restaurants omitting to focus on e-WOM (Longart, 2010; Babin *et al.*, 2005). Although these studies are insightful, they both refer to the fact that the investigation of e-WOM was outside of the scope of their studies, a fact they both presented as limitations in their research. There is an increasing consumer reliance on e-WOM when choosing a restaurant, as a result of the service being high in experience characteristics (Obal *et al.*, 2011; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2011; Mitra *et al.*, 1999; Nelson, 1970).

This paucity of research on e-WOM in restaurant has led the researchers to conduct this study that aims to explore the area of e-WOM, specifically relating to restaurants. In line with the assertions that not all WOM communication will have the intended effects, Berger (2013) discoursed about the fact that some communication is more effective than others and become viral while other content is not transmitted on. To determine how this happens is vital for marketers. Hence, the main objective of this research is to investigate the types and styles of communication that work best in achieving positive consumer e-WOM, given that the Internet and social media is a 'distinct phenomenon' (Steffes and Burgee, 2009). Thus a research question is formulated in this study:

- What types and styles of communications work best in stimulating e-WOM through social media?

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. WOM influencers

In terms of WOM influencers, (Gladwell 2000, 33), described three kinds of people he calls Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen. Connectors are "gregarious and intensely social" and have "raw transmission power", as a result of knowing and being connected to a large number of people. Connectors bring the world together (Gladwell, 2000) and possess the ability to present and expose causes, brands and businesses like restaurants. According to Price *et al.* (1995, 258) "a Maven is a person who has information on a lot of different products or prices or places". This person initiates conversations with consumers and respond to requests. The way Mavens interact on an interpersonal level influences the way how the message is interpreted and perceived. Salesmen transmit enthusiasm and influence people in such a way that they would agree with them (Gladwell, 2000). They are liked, they have charm. Sweeney *et al.*, (2008) examined the traits of these influencers. Amongst them are characteristics in presentation of the message like enthusiasm, story-telling ability, intensity of voice, and conviction of the sender. This can enhance or detract from the strength of the message received and the resulting consumer's decisions.

Summing up, Gladwell (2000, 70) defined the roles of these influencers: "In a social epidemic, Mavens are data banks. They provide the message. Connectors are social glue: they spread it. But there is also a select group of people – Salesmen – with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing, and they are as critical to the tipping of WOM epidemics as the other two groups."

### 1.2. e-WOM in Social media environments

The extent of influence of social media is evidence by the fact that, for instance, Facebook has 1.65 billion monthly active users, with 1.09 billion of them logging onto Facebook daily (Zephoria Digital Marketing, 2016). Also, 510,000 comments are posted on Facebook every sixty seconds; 56% of people are more likely to recommend a brand after becoming a friend on Facebook; and 33% of US online consumers have made a purchase based on recommendations from friends on the social platform (Sibley, 2012). An average Facebook user has 130 friends, with more than two billion posts liked or commented on each day (Carter and Levy, 2012). It has to be acknowledged that the consumer landscape has radically changed in recent times due to the "distinct phenomenon" that is the Internet and social media (Steffes and Burgee, 2009). It is fair to say that the Internet and its social media communities have "injected steroids" into the WOM process by providing an organised platform with a reach like never before (Kliatchko, 2008). The result is that WOM, and more specifically e-WOM, is of more importance now, to marketers and consumers alike, than at any time in history (Brown *et al.*, 2007).

Nonetheless, greater reach is not the only change social media has introduced to the WOM arena, the speed at which e-WOM is distributed has greatly changed too. Research by Dellarocas (2003), which now seems to have been ahead of its time, helps to further develop the distinction between traditional WOM and e-WOM, by

suggesting that WOM is generally the "process of sharing information between small groups of two or more interested parties. Whereas, e-WOM harnesses the bi-directional communication properties and unlimited reach of the Internet to share opinions and experiences on a one-to-world platform rather than a one-to-one platform" (Dellarocas, 2003, 1415). WOM is no longer one-to-one, as in the traditional sender and receiver sense, but many-to-many, as multiple people participate in electronic conversations simultaneously (Libai *et al.*, 2010). However, the sheer volume of information posted online leads to the need for the information to sustain interest (Fogel, 2010). That can be achieved by improving the stickiness" of the information presented (Godin, 2005). Godin argues it may necessary to tinker with the presentation of the information, to make it more "sticky". In an effort to achieve this, marketers are increasingly investing much of their time, energy and budgets into, not only sparking, but also tracking consumer conversations about their brands online (Carl, 2009).

It has been suggested that the power in marketing message generation, and acceleration of such messages, has shifted from producers to consumers as a result of the Internet and social media (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). Audiences are no longer just receivers of media content but are simultaneous co-producers of the content through engagement with social media and other Internet-based platforms (Kliatchko, 2008). Marketers have lost much of the control they once had over the marketing message, but now participate in a "conversation" about the brand (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009). Although this can be the case among groups belonging to any generation, it is particularly of relevance to Generation Y consumers, or those born after 1981 (Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011). In consideration of the widespread adoption of social media (Sultan *et al.*, 2009), brands that aim to stimulate conversations and engagement, that build relationships and look to co-create content and value, with Generation Y will reap the most rewards (Peres *et al.*, 2011). These rewards are considered to be long term.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Research Design

This exploratory study examines electronic WOM regarding restaurants. The study was conducted in Dublin (Ireland) is cross-sectional involving semi-structured, in-depth interviews with restaurant marketers currently using social media, to explore how the practice has become a central component of their integrated marketing communications program. It also involved a focus group, and two subsequent interviews, with restaurant consumers, to explore their use of social media in the context of conveying and receiving influential electronic WOM. Following the focus group, the research included two separate further in-depth interviews with two of the focus group participants who appeared particularly knowledgeable. Adequate time was given to complete (with interviews ranging from 30-60 minutes and the focus group lasting 50 minutes).

Dine in Dublin was contacted. Dine in Dublin is a website (Dine in Dublin.ie, 2013) which also runs an event twice a year supporting and promoting Dublin-based restaurants. They proposed restaurants who actively use social media websites to promote their business and whose marketing managers would be willing to participate in this research. All restaurants selected were of similar quality and price and located within the Dublin 2 area. Dine in Dublin also helped in selecting the sample of consumers required for the study. They posted a request on their Facebook page (Dine in Dublin Facebook Page, 2013), asking for participants to the consumer focus group. Therefore, the actual method used to select the consumer sample was self-selection where, as a result of participant's interest and opinions about the research questions, individuals were allowed to identify their desire to take part in the research.

This small sample is deemed enough for this exploratory study, because of the insightful knowledge provided in a relatively small market (Dublin 2 area). Four restaurant marketers who volunteered as respondents are described as:

- Restaurant A: A restaurant Marketing Director of a restaurant who has won awards for its work with social media.
- Restaurant B: Commercial Manager of a Dublin-based business that has business interests across a number of hospitality areas including restaurants, hotels, pubs, and music venues.
- Restaurant C: Marketing Executive of a 5-star hotel with an important restaurant business.
- Restaurant D: Marketing Manager of a city-centre restaurant with a significant online presence.

Consumer participants were Irish, in their 20s and 30s, screened in that there were two qualifying criteria (1) they must eat in a restaurant at least once per month, and (2) they must have an active presence on social media. Although these screening questions were asked of them, as they selected themselves through a social media website (Facebook) on a restaurant-interest page they chose to follow (Dine in Dublin), there was a reasonably high chance that they would meet the criteria. Initially thirteen (13) members were recruited and qualified but only six (6) participated. Although the focus group provided a great deal of information, two additional in-depth interviews were conducted with the two participants of the original qualified group of thirteen. One was selected (Consumer A) because was a food blogger (blogging about baking) and could be termed a heavy user of social media. For an individual social media user, she had a considerable reach across a number of different social media platforms; Facebook (2,700), Twitter (3,061), Instagram (691), Pinterest (438). The second one Consumer B is a nutritionist who has a passionate interest in food and eating in restaurants. Although all the other members are also active it was deemed that the knowledge of food or involvement in social media was not nearly as high as these two individuals. Please see Appendix 1 to see the list of questions asked in the consumer interviews and focus group and the focus group with some examples of how themes emerged in Appendix 2.

### 2.2. Data analysis and Trustworthiness of the research

Interviews were analysed using Applied Thematic Analysis because it allows for determining precisely the relationships between concepts and compare them with the replicated data (Alhojailan, 2012). Although the main aim of the research is to explore how social media can be used to stimulate e-WOM, some practical implications can be derived, which may be concomitant to theory building, though not the main purpose. In this respect, Guest *et al*. (2011) stated that unlike Grounded Theory, Applied Thematic Analysis is not restricted to building theory, hence appropriate for this research. Braun and Clarke (2006) view Applied Thematic Analysis as a foundational method for qualitative analysis. The interview transcriptions will be analysed using Qualitative Data Analysis Systems (QDAS) and Nvivo© was the software platform for organising and managing data and finding and classifying themes. Themes were identified inductively by looking at emergent topics that are discussed by the interviewees. The main technique for identifying themes was cutting and sorting (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 347–51). As defined by Ryan and Bernard (2003), this method involves identifying quotes or expressions that seem somehow important and then arranging the quotes/expressions into piles of things that seem to belong together.

Maxwell (1992) argued that issues of sampling, representativeness and generalizability are crucial when the researcher wants to draw inferences from the respondents to other persons. In this order of ideas, the researchers adopt the view that although interpretive studies are not generalizable in the conventional meaning of the word as generalizability in qualitative research is elusive (Whittemore *et al.*, 2001), they may have redeeming features which makes them highly valuable (Myers, 2000). On the other hand, the sampling strategy is deemed to be theoretically comprehensive -a diverse range of individuals and settings- to ensure the generalizability of the conceptual analysis (Mays and Pope, 1995). With regard to validity, interpretivist research depends on the presentation of solid descriptive data, with meaningful sense to the reader, so that this reader is led to an understanding of the meaning of the experience under study (Stake, 1995). Several of Guest *et al.*'s (2011) recommended techniques for qualitative research are followed to enhance validity. These are:

- The use of multiple data sources. The research looks at the phenomena from two perspectives, marketers and consumers and combines in-depth and focus-group interviews. Careful attention was made to the selection of respondents for enhance trustworthiness.
- Having a peer review of coding and summaries. Whereas the first author conducted the interviews based on the work for his MSc dissertation, the co-author of this paper conducted the review of coding and summaries.
- Having an audit trail using QDAS. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the audit trail was facilitated by using QDAS (Nvivo).
- Triangulating data sources (from consumers and restaurant marketers). In this case, both business generated communications and consumer generated communications are compared, contrasted and analysed.
- Supporting themes and interpretations with quotes.

## 3. RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

### 3.1. Themes identified

Four main themes were identified. These and their sub-themes are the following:

1. Online Marketing: Challenges for implementation.
    1.1. Planning process
    1.2. Features of online marketing: Styles mix
2. Centrality of Online Content.
    2.1. Features of interesting online content
3. Entertaining content.
    3.1. Importance of humour in online content
4. Remarkable and 'sticky' content.
    4.1. Issue of competitions
    4.2. Role of communications style
    4.3. Influence of social media forums on frequency of messages
5. Type and style of restaurant-generated social media communication
    5.1. Timing

### 3.2. Online Marketing: Challenges for implementation

It was found that marketing communications through social media are much more fluid than the offline counterpart. It relies more on instinct than on a rigid planning process. One of the reasons given is that the marketing environment changes so often and developments in the media make marketers to react to those developments and generate content that interests the audience. On the other hand, social media communication needs to be engaging and interactive, but at the same time it must promote the restaurant. That in itself represents a major challenge. A key finding is that communications that are overtly promotional will not generate the intended e-WOM effect. On the contrary, it is about developing relationships rather than "hard" selling. This concurs with the view of Deighton and Kornfeld (2009), who proposed that marketers should participate in a "conversation" about what is being promoted.

A way of creating a viral campaign is by inviting the audience to engage in what the restaurant is doing. For example, a restaurant that launched a new summer cocktail menu rather than advertise the new menu requested its Facebook friends to get involved by assigning names to the new cocktails. An incentive was offered to the person who chose the winning name. This is one way to face the challenge of creating interactive and engaging communications. In contrast, it was found that excessively promotional content makes the audience to "unfriend" and "unfollow" a restaurant on Facebook and Twitter.

Another remarkable challenge is to make the communications to have a personal touch, and restaurant marketers felt that it was almost compulsory to personally sign-off on posts. It was also found that communications must be distinctive, and restaurants must be able to transmit their own character through their social media content.

### 3.3. Centrality of Online Content and their entertaining nature

The interviews revealed that sharing content was the result of finding the content to be interesting, otherwise it would not be shared. That agrees with the findings of Sernovitz (2006) and Hughes (2005). As for the attributes that the audience share more, it was found that "good food" was the most shared subject. Remarkably, interviewees share insightful content about the restaurant employees at work or other "back office" scenes such as the sourcing of the restaurant food. That revealing content into a restaurant background was considered interesting. In addition, there seems to be a connection between the interest for cooking and the sharing of interesting seasonal recipes using unusual ingredients. Usefulness of information seemed to be another theme, and a key driver for sharing information appeared to be content that may benefit other online friends. A respondent put it this way: "For me to share that (social media content) with my friends, I wouldn't really be doing so for the benefit of the restaurant, I would be sharing it for the benefit of my friends." That seems to be a key finding, not found in the literature to-date.

Content that was hilarious tended to be inherently sharable. Communication that contains funnier, off-the-cuff posts is likely to achieve more engagement and is re-tweeted more often. The restaurant marketers interviewed also agreed with the consumers-respondents in terms that communication of this type reflected the restaurant's personality. Witty messages written on a blackboard outside a restaurant were also shared by one of the respondents. It can be concluded that entertaining content does stimulate e-WOM, a concept that does not explicitly appear in the literature hitherto.

### 3.4. Remarkable and 'sticky' content

The interview guide did not explicitly examine the features that make content beneficial to other online friends. Nonetheless, previous research can give a few clues in this respect. Gladwell (2000) claimed that information needs to be "tinkered with" to make it stickier. Likewise, messages need to be "remarkable" (Godin, 2005). This is because information must be capable of sustaining interest (Fogel, 2010). It was found that a communication style based on competition-type content had a tendency to be shared. Also, it appeared to be a driver for increasing the size of the audience on social media. Restaurants shared the view that competitions are very effective for those purposes. They claimed that the audience wanted to gain something out of their participation, something like a free meal. They added that a substantial number of new followers were added after a competition. However, a word of caution was offered as well. This is about using competitions sparingly. Constant promotions, they argued, may affect negatively the restaurant´s image and it would appear as "cheapening" the offer for attracting consumers; something that restaurant-goers would be suspicious about. Another issue affecting remarkableness of information is currency of interest as content that loses interest tends to be ignored. For example, if messages from competitions become predictable, it may lead to customer boredom as it would look like that is the only way to get consumer interest, ending up in the message being ignored.

In addition to the finding that the style of online and offline communications differ, also communication style should match the type of social media site within which the message is initially generated. It can be concluded that in agreement with Brown *et al*. (2007), the tone of voice should be adapted for specific social media platforms, to suit that of the individual forum. The medium selected differs with regard to frequency as well. Restaurateurs interviewed claimed that Facebook messages should be less frequent than in Twitter: "Generally we would post twice a day on Facebook. That usually works for us in terms of not wanting to bombard people". On the other hand, they run against the idea of linking the two media because they are quite different in nature. Whereas Twitter has a more immediate impact; and it is possible to post perhaps in excess. This may simply be the result of the fact that not everybody is catching everything at the same time. Consumers agreed with this statement. These respondents complained that unduly frequent messages are a source of irritation, especially if the content "clogged up" the individual's newsfeed so that all they could see is content from that particular restaurant. In the same line of thought, it was concluded that social media content should be carefully staggered. Messages should be generated at intervals throughout the day or week, instead of bombarding with too many messages at once.

Another issue raised is whether content remains interesting if messages are frequent and numerous. A key finding was that frequency is less important than the generation of interesting content. Likewise, frequency should be regular enough so as to sustain the interest of the receiver. Hence, a balance between the extremes of the frequency continuum must be found. Sticky content is that one that makes the audience laugh or that is inherently interesting, that leads to the content be more sharable. On the other hand being too infrequent in posting may lead to the restaurant been unnoticeable.

### 3.5. Type and style of restaurant-generated social media communication

It was also found that timing of posting content is critical. It was found that restaurant marketers post important content on particular days. For instance, the worst response was found to happen shared on Mondays, Tuesdays, or Wednesdays, and the best response for generating e-WOM through social media content takes place on Thursday. Contrastingly, although the consumers interviewed agreed that messages sent over the weekend get the best reception, many claimed to follow and engage in social media communications in a very frequent fashion, such as for example, every evening or even at any time during the day or week. This is because consumers are actively checking on social media at idle items such as waiting for a bus at any time, on any day, sharing content that they deemed worth sharing. It leads to the idea of a more mobile consumer who uses mobile media on a frequent basis. That seems to be a trait of generation Y consumers who appear to be hyper connected. That meant that user-generated content deserves to be considered equally important to marketer-generated content. In this context, a line of research emerges. That is about the possible triggers for engaging consumers for the creation and spreading of such messages regarding a consumer's restaurant experience. Studies like the one of Longart (2010) in the generation of Positive word of mouth offline need to be conducted for online communications.

### 3.6. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study was conducted in Dublin and, although the findings are considered to be high in validity and possessing a generalizability quality, further research outside in another European capital (s) would provide a better understanding of the issues examined in this study.

On the other hand, this research has been limited to looking into the effectiveness of communication from the perspective of restaurateurs and consumers. Further validation with quantitative analysis of actual campaigns and the responses and effects that the campaign has had could be carried out in further research. On the other hand, cultural factors may influence the styles and types of communication that are more effective in a particular context, thus similar research in other countries may be beneficial to elucidate potential differences with the findings of this research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The following four (4) recommendations to restaurant marketers who are interesting in creating positive e-WOM through social media are made:

1. Maintain fluid and flexible communications: Social media communications need to be more casual and flexible than traditional marketing communications.
2. Adapt tactics by channel: The principles of marketing communications in terms of channel are critically important with regard to the use of specific communication tactics, suitable to different social media channels and their respective audiences. The tone of voice and frequency of communications need to be adjusted for the social media platform (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn).
3. Give the content "stickiness": Practical measures such as competitions help in achieving stickiness. However, competitions should not be over used and it leads to boredom and predictability. Likewise, humorous content is also found to achieve that purpose and that content that and tells the story behind the restaurant brand as is content that is giving something of value (e.g. recipes using seasonal ingredients).
4. Adapt the social media strategy to include mobile: There is an increasing trends towards mobile consumption of social. That constant use of social media needs monitoring for daily and weekly peaks in the social media activity of their audience. Likewise, specific messages for mobile media should be created and posted.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are indebted to the Dine in Dublin team for their valuable collaboration and input throughout the research. Thank you very much.

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Please cite this article as: Fox, G., Longart, P. (2016), Electronic word-of-mouth: successful communication strategies for restaurants, Tourism and Hospitality Management, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 211-223, https://doi.org/10.20867/thm.22.2.5