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# MAKING WAVES: CAPITALIZING ON WORD-OF-MOUTH MARKETING

BY JAMES CHUNG AND CATHY DEELY

## A SURVEY OF WATERPARK CUSTOMERS REVEALS HOW GUESTS SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES—BOTH GOOD AND BAD

Sometimes, your customers are better marketers than your marketing staff.

In a Reach Advisors survey examining word-of-mouth marketing, Carolyn Kammen of Madison, Wis., was one of many respondents who love talking about waterparks. How does she articulate those experiences? "Every year, I make my annual pilgrimage to Noah's Ark to remind me that life really is a wild waterpark ride—and I need to let go, scream and enjoy the ride!"

How did she start that pilgrimage 8 years ago? A friend told her Noah's was clean, fun and well-run. And, since then, Carolyn figures that she's told 30 other people about Noah's Ark.

### TALKING LEADS TO WALKING... INTO YOUR WATERPARK

Many marketers view word-of-mouth marketing as important to their business, but few realize that some of the most successful marketers in America actively orchestrate and manage the process. When it comes down to it, happy customers with big mouths are among the most powerful marketing tools available to any waterpark. Best of all, if you have an established customer base, you have an arsenal of these tools already at your disposal—if you can deploy them well.

So how much does word-of-mouth really matter? When the Reach Advisors survey asked what factors influenced

visit decisions, two factors topped the list with a big lead: Past experience and personal recommendations, well ahead of factors such as discounting, proximity and advertising (see boxed information, "Influences on Guests' Decisions Whether To Visit a Waterpark," below).

With survey respondents indicating that they told, on average, 10 others about their favorite waterpark, the bottom line is that word-of-mouth marketing activities unquestionably should be part of your marketing mix. Here are five tips to help make that happen:

- 1. Determine who are your "Pied Pipers."** Just as in any other aspect of life, certain people are more inclined than others to vocalize their thoughts about your waterpark. Your mission is to identify which clusters of customers have the highest impact on others' decisions. These people, sometimes called "connectors" or "sneezers," have deep social networks and credibility with your most important customer segments. (Remember that

## INFLUENCES ON GUESTS' DECISIONS WHETHER TO VISIT A WATERPARK

<b>Past experience</b>	<b>79%</b>
<b>Personal recommendation</b>	<b>77%</b>
Admission discount	59%
Lodging discount	39%
Closest to home	38%
Waterpark Web site	30%
Advertisement	25%
Close to other activities	19%
Email from waterpark	16%
Friends or family decided	16%
Part of organized group	10%
News story	9%
Other factors	9%

Source: Reach Advisors survey



some diehards may be singing your praises, but they aren't necessarily credible or even heard by your most important customer segments.)

Some companies take on this cluster-analysis process through aggressive tagging and analysis of customer data, but that's typically found in industries with big IT budgets. Other companies conduct this analysis using market research, but that's sometimes outside the reach of small organizations. And some organizations accomplish this simply through a rigorous process of careful listening and observation by management. Regardless of how you perform this analysis, the payout can be high.

Even if that level of analysis and targeting just isn't going to happen at your waterpark, remember one key point: 86 percent of waterpark customers have told others about their waterpark visits. Word-of-mouth marketing really matters, whether or not you manage it in a targeted manner.

**2. Find out how your park is different—and whether it matters.** No need to despair if people aren't going to be able to tell their friends that you have the biggest slides and wave pools. What matters is that you determine what factors create the most meaningful differentiation in the minds of your most profitable customers. When figuring that out, you should analyze how the customer base that you want differs from the average waterpark customer. And then, when you tackle their most important issues, make sure your delivery exceeds their expectations because people don't tend to rave about what they view as basic, average or expected.

To get people talking, the differentiation has to be

## 1,800 WATERPARK CUSTOMERS KISS AND TELL

More than 1,800 adult waterpark customers shared detailed information about their waterpark visits in a January 2006 survey conducted by Reach Advisors, a marketing strategy and research firm that focuses on the recreational lives of American households. Survey respondents included customers from a range of waterparks—indoor and outdoor facilities, the nation's largest waterpark resorts, mid-size waterpark and amusement parks, and public recreational facilities. More details from the survey findings are available for free to WWA members by contacting (617) 489-6180 or [reach@reachadvisors.com](mailto:reach@reachadvisors.com).

crystal clear in a noticeable way—something that gives customers a hook when talking to their peers. For example, when we looked at survey responses from one of the participating waterparks, many customers indicated that they felt "nickel and dimed" at competing waterparks. And when the same survey respondents responded to another question about what they tell their friends when recommending their favorite waterpark, those customers commonly responded: "They provide free sodas!"

Key point: You have to deliver real and noticeable differentiation in the minds of your customers, and make it important enough for them to sell it to their friends.

**3. Deliver a message customers want to pass on.** While waterpark customers regularly share their impressions with others by phone and face-to-face contact, one communication vehicle remains surprisingly underutilized in their discussions: Only 27 percent of survey respondents report talking with friends about waterparks via e-mail. In other recreational industries with similar dynamics, we find that e-mail word-of-mouth reaches a higher percentage of customers.

This relative lag of word-of-mouth via e-mail represents a major opportunity for many waterparks. Most of your customers already use e-mail for activity planning with family and friends. As one survey respondent stated, it would help with his planning if he got e-mail messages that were worth forwarding to others—and we find this dynamic happening far more frequently outside the waterpark business. But fulfilling this need requires good copywriting designed to trigger that behavior, and a hook that makes customers want to sell that message to their peers.

**4. Create a "sneeze-worthy" brand message.** Not only must a waterpark give customers something to talk about, but you also must provide the words with which to talk about it. Famed author Seth Godin says that the right words are: "A script for the sneezer to use when she talks to her friends. The script reminds the customer, 'Here's why it's worth recommending us; here's why your friends will be glad you told them about us.' And, best of all, the script guarantees that the word-of-mouth is passed along properly."

**5. Perhaps the best examples of effective scripting can be found in the discount airline business.** When asked about Southwest Airlines, most customers would answer with some variation of: "It's a cattle call, but they make it cheap and fun." Most JetBlue customers would answer with some variation of: "It's cheap, cool and, hey, they have TV too." The consistency of these customer comments isn't accidental; these companies reinforce these "unofficial" scripts in their marketing communications and service delivery.

## AND NOTICEABLE DIFFERENTIATION."

**6. Sometimes it takes blowing it...** No business likes to hear that a customer has had a negative experience. But it's important to note that, in most cases, a waterpark will never hear when their customers are dissatisfied. Among the 41 percent of survey respondents who've had a disappointing waterpark experience, we asked what they did:

### Actions taken after poor experiences

Called the waterpark to complain.....	3%
Wrote the waterpark .....	6%
E-mailed the waterpark .....	6%
Told a manager .....	14%
Told the employee .....	18%
Just let it slide .....	28%
Decided not to return again .....	69%
<b>Told others .....</b>	<b>90%</b>

It's a big deal when a customer with an issue is virtually guaranteed to tell others. But you have an even bigger problem when a customer has an issue: After all, from our study, on average, they told *nine* others!

But does that have to be bad news? We've seen a number of other businesses that have created particularly aggressive and effective service-recovery programs. The net benefit is that while a bad experience will almost certainly trigger negative word-of-mouth, you can turn it into a positive

## 2006 CONVENTION PREVIEW

**Don't Miss This Seminar!** Author James Chung will be speaking on "Word-of-Mouth Marketing" during WWA's 26th Annual Symposium & Trade Show, Oct. 18-22 at Disney World in Orlando, Fla. For information on the convention, visit [Waterparks.org](http://Waterparks.org) or call Aleatha Ezra, Membership & Marketing Services Manager, at (913) 599-0300.

with the right skills. Imagine turning those nine negative conversations into a dialogue that might sound something like: "At first, it was sort of a drag when that happened. But, in the end, the waterpark really took care of us to make sure we had a great time. You really should join us next time!"

Bottom line: Getting included in the personal interactions of your customers is one of the most important hooks for getting someone to your waterpark. Word-of-mouth marketing gives you the credibility that advertising can't buy, the market penetration that you might not be able to afford and the inclusion in conversations that can't be missed. It's up to waterparks to figure out how to make it worthwhile for customers to put their personal reputation at stake and spread the word. **WWA**

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For tips on how to participate, get a copy of the "WWA National Water Safety Week Guide" by calling (913) 599-0300 or e-mailing [gkellogg@waterparks.org](mailto:gkellogg@waterparks.org).

National Water Safety Week coincides with National Water Safety Week in Canada (sponsored by the Canadian Red Cross) and National Safety Month (sponsored by the National Safety Council).

