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Buzz and Ethnic Small Businesses

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Abstract: *The objective of this paper was to examine the impact of the context of the business on the perceived effectiveness of buzz. Three sets of variables were considered: co-ethnic interaction between the small business owner and fellow ethnics, the neighbourhood in which the business was situated and the nature of the product/service being offered by the business. It was found that percent co-ethnic employees and level of family income had the biggest impact on the perceived effectiveness of buzz. The implications of these results for the business were discussed.*

As a tool for motivating buyers to act, mass communication has severe limitations. While relatively inexpensive on a per capita basis, mass communication fails to take into account individual differences among buyers; the same message is delivered to all. This standardization severely limits the communicator's ability to capitalize on individual needs, attitudes and values when promoting products and services. Moreover, mass communication does not easily permit immediate feedback from the consumer. If potential consumers have specific objections to the message, the marketer often has difficulty identifying individual objections and presenting counter-arguments to them. For these reasons, many marketers recommend >one-to-one-marketing= (Peppers and Rogers, 1997; Osenton, 2002).

An important aspect of one-to-one-marketing is word-of-mouth communication, a powerful influence on the attitudes and behaviour of customers (Susskind, 2002; File, Cermak and Prince, 1994; Haywood, 1989). The influence of word-of-mouth communication on consumers stems from their perception that they are receiving information from a neutral source (Lau and Ng, 2001; Bansal and Voyer, 2000), since the information tends to come from acquaintances and friends, and not from the firm that is marketing its goods and services. In word-of-mouth communication, opportunities exist for the sender to explain, to tailor the message to the receiver and to provide counter arguments to possible objections. As a result, messages gain credibility, and messages with high credibility have the greatest impact.

Recently, there has been growing interest in the phenomenon of *buzz* (Khermouch and Green, 2001). Buzz is an intense form of word-of-mouth or informal communication among customers about a company or its products and services. Rosen (2000, page 7) defines buzz as "the aggregate of all person-to-person communication about a particular product, service or company at any point in time." Buzz can be transmitted via the Internet and it can also be stimulated when influential people use or recommend the product or service. It acquires a self-propelling force within and between social groups, with the sender transmitting the message as a favour to the recipient. Thus, buzz creates its own explosive self-generating demand (Dye, 2000). The sudden popularity of the Hush Puppy brand of footwear in the mid-nineties is a case in point. Prior to 1994, sales of Hush Puppies were in the region of 30 thousand pairs a year, and the company was thinking of phasing out the brand. In 1995, however, the company sold 430 thousand pairs, and four times that number in 1996. The buzz had begun in the clubs and bars of Manhattan and then the shoe was picked up and used by famous designers. Suddenly, the demand for Hush Puppies skyrocketed (Gladwell, 2002).

There are a number of reasons for the increasing popularity of buzz as a means of promoting a product, service or business. Low cost is one reason. Unlike traditional means of promotion such as advertising or personal selling, buzz often only requires an event or demonstration or probably the giving away of samples to potentially influential persons in the community. At relatively little cost to the business, these influential people promote the product/service simply by using or discussing it. The advent of chat groups and other interactive forms of Internet communication also facilitate the growth of buzz.

Unfortunately, while relatively inexpensive, buzz is difficult for the business owner to control because of the informal and generally casual nature of the information transmission B the “hidden” network of friends and acquaintances (Brown and Reingen, 1987, Rosen 2002). Unlike mass communication, where the advertiser designs the message with specific target audiences in mind, and unlike the selling strategies of salespeople which can be modified depending on the characteristics of the consumer, buzz often takes on a life of its own.

Some companies try to take an active role in generating buzz for their products and services, while trying to hide their sponsorship. The introduction of the Ford Focus is a good example of the active use of buzz by a company. Ford recruited a handful of trend-setters in a few communities and gave each a Focus to drive for six months. Their role was to be seen with the car and to hand Focus-themed trinkets to anyone who expressed an interest in the car (Khermouch and Green, 2001). More often however, buzz arises naturally without the active encouragement of any organization. For example, many small businesses that are closely integrated with their communities depend on the spontaneous transmission of information by customers, friends and acquaintances to generate excitement about their products or services. This excitement may spread quickly if the business has, for example, a wide assortment of favoured products, or particularly good prices. Buzz may also be generated if the business has a product/service that consumers have long been waiting for.

The goal of this paper is to understand the context in which spontaneously-generated buzz develops. The spread of buzz is clearly dependent on the social links among participants in the process. Factors such as the frequency of interaction among potential customers, and the extent to which they understand and care about one another=s needs will affect the development of buzz. In particular, we were interested in buzz about the products and services offered by *ethnic small businesses*. We focused on ethnic businesses because their generally close ties to their ethnic communities seemed to provide an ideal context for the study of the transmission of buzz about products and services within a broad social group.

Ethnic Small Businesses

The concept of ethnicity is an important one in the Canadian context. Canadians speak of their society as a cultural mosaic, where the policy of the various levels of government is to maintain and promote the cultural heritage of different ethnic groups. While “ethnicity” is sometimes equated with “race”, in this paper we adopt a sociological definition where the focus is on the shared awareness of ancestral differences (Feagin and Feagin, 1996). These differences may include culture, language and national origin. On the basis of these shared characteristics the ethnic group sees itself as being different from other groups, and others also view it as being different. Ethnic small business thus refers to a business whose owner belongs to a group of people who share a common ancestry and a strong sense of cultural heritage.

In Canada, businesses owned by different ethnic groups play an increasingly prominent role in the overall business community. These businesses are often found in industries where the barriers to entry are low B restaurants, construction, personal services and retailing are some examples (Butler and Greene, 1997). Some of the smaller ethnic groups, such as blacks, occupy particular niches and focus, in the main, on satisfying the needs of their own communities. They form enclaves of economic activity whereby these businesses hire fellow-ethnic employees, use fellow-ethnic suppliers and target fellow-ethnics as customers. The larger and more established groups, such as the Italians of Montreal, have maintained traditional ethnic firms, but have also developed businesses that focus on the mainstream of society.

The Perceived Usefulness of Buzz Among Ethnic Small Businesses

This paper addresses the following question: What are the community-based factors that influence the perceived usefulness of buzz among ethnic small businesses? Three sets of factors seem particularly relevant: The extent of the business owners' interactions with their own ethnic group, the characteristics of the neighbourhood in which the business is located, and the nature of the product or service offered by the business.

Co-ethnic Interaction: The percentage of people in the neighbourhood who belong to the same ethnic group as the small business owner is likely to have an impact on the development of buzz. The transmission of buzz, according to Gladwell (2002), requires three types of people: *Connectors*, those who know lots of people, *Mavens*, those who have lots of information and are willing to help and educate, and *Salespeople*, those who have influence and are able to persuade. Members of the same ethnic group often belong to the same social groups, have common social activities and have children who may go to the same schools. Thus within a predominantly ethnic neighbourhood, there may be a larger than average number of connectors. It is also possible that among minority groups, well-established members will have lots of information and they will be motivated to share this information with others, i.e. play the role of mavens, especially among those co-ethnics who may have arrived only recently. It is also fairly well known, that influential and persuasive salespeople are those who share many social characteristics with their audience. Among ethnic groups therefore, the most persuasive persons will be fellow ethnics. Thus the larger the percentage of co-ethnic residents in a neighbourhood, the more likely will be the presence of these social types. A small percentage of co-ethnic residents, however, may be below the "tipping point" (Gladwell, 2002) required for the easy transmission of information.

Co-ethnic employees of the business are also likely to have an impact on buzz. Consider, for example, the case of a customer belonging to the same ethnic group as the employee, entering a retail store. It is likely that they will recognize their mutual cultural affinities and begin discussing life in the "old country" or places and events with which they may be familiar. They may also begin discussing life in their adopted country, sharing mutual advice such as where one should shop for the best services or products. Customer trust in the employee will have an impact because of the perceived care, trust and personal connection (Gremler, Gwinner and Brown). This scene, repeated numerous times, generates the kind of activity and the level of social intercourse that would not be possible if the employee and the client were not of the same ethnic group. This sharing of information takes place because of the identity of cultures and the recognition that they each may need help in the host country.

The Neighbourhood: The immediate environment has an important impact on any business. The spread of buzz about the business and its offerings is one such impact. Many ethnic firms are small and their size allows the business owners to develop an intimate relation with their community (Barnes, 2001). For example, conversations may occur between the owner and the customers about personal and family matters, vacations and other social topics. Intimate relations may also develop because of the absence of red tape and bureaucracy that sometimes impede communication between the owner and the clients. These close relations allow the neighbourhood to be fully aware of the offerings of the business and this awareness facilitates the spread of information concerning the business.

Gladwell (2002) provides numerous examples of the power of the environment or what he refers to as *context*. Little things in the environment, he argues, can have a profound impact on the way people behave. Using the theory of “broken windows” he shows how the environment can affect people’s honesty, willingness to help, or propensity to engage in criminal behaviour. The “broken windows” theory suggests that if broken windows, graffiti and general disorderliness is left unchecked, fairly soon the signal is sent out that no one cares. As more and more people begin to believe that no one cares, the area begins to attract undesirables. On the other hand, by improving the appearance of a neighbourhood one can influence the quality of life. These examples demonstrate that context influences the behaviour of a neighbourhood including the progress of buzz through the community.

One would expect, therefore, that in neighbourhoods where there may be large concentrations of different ethnic groups, people who speak the same language, face the same social and domestic problems and opportunities, belong to the same community organizations and send their children to the same schools, that the spread of the buzz epidemic would be much more virulent relative to neighbourhoods where these conditions did not exist. These conditions will facilitate the spread of buzz because all immigrant groups will be facing the same conditions and there will, therefore, be a natural tendency among acquaintances who belong to different groups, to share ways of coping.

Butler and Greene (1997) point out that many ethnic small businesses operate in industries such as restaurant, construction, personal services and retailing. Given the importance of these products and services in the daily lives of consumers, it is likely that the lower the income level the more people would share information about where the good deals can be found, or where the best service can be had.

A neighbourhood that is relatively stable also lends itself to the development of buzz. A stable neighbourhood is one where citizens seldom change their place of residence. Consequently, they develop familiarity with the businesses that exist and with the owners of those businesses. They also develop stronger relations with their neighbours and are therefore well positioned to act as communication linkages between the businesses and the members of the neighbourhood. Long term neighbourhood residents can also act as linkages between different social groups in the neighbourhood.

The Nature of the Product or Service: Rosen (2000) identifies a number of different kinds of products that people may buzz about. These products are a) exciting products, b) innovative products, c) personal experience products, d) complex products, e) expensive products and f) observable products. As a generalization, he referred to these as high-involvement products. Involvement is a person’s perceived relevance to the object based on their inherent needs, values and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Product involvement can be thought of as the person’s level of interest in a product (Lau and Ng, 2001; Solomon, Zaichkowsky and Polegato, 2002). The higher the level of interest the more time and energy will be devoted to comparing and seeking out information about the product. The interaction with the salesperson is likely to be intense and questioning, the consumer will also critically evaluate the different products or services. The level of interest could be cognitive, for example the purchase of a computer, or affective as for example a high quality perfume or it may be a combination of both.

Ethnic groups often feel the need to experience a product or service that brings back memories of their birthplace. These symbols are important for maintaining the identity of the group and for reducing the sense of alienation that sometimes implants itself in the minds of members of these

groups. If a business provides a product or service that is reminiscent of the home culture, then the level of buzz is likely to be stimulated. Fellow ethnics will spread the excitement of what is available to friends and acquaintances. Consequently whether the product/service is ethnic or not is likely to influence the development of buzz.

Hypotheses

Based on the foregoing, we developed the following hypotheses:

1. The higher the percentage of co-ethnic employees and co-ethnics in the neighbourhood, the greater will be the perceived effectiveness of buzz by the business owner.
2. The attributes of the neighbourhood, in particular the presence of a large percentage of ethnic groups, lower levels of household income and a greater degree of stability will be associated with a greater perceived effectiveness of buzz by the business owner.
3. Businesses having products with high levels of involvement and an ethnic product or service, will perceive buzz as more effective.

Method

Participants: The participants in this study consisted of 54 ethnic entrepreneurs and small business people in Montreal and its suburbs. These respondents were part of a larger sample of entrepreneurs and small business people. The ethnic groups represented were Chinese, Greek, Haitian, Italian and Middle Eastern. To obtain the original sample we used contacts within each of the ethnic groups and using a snowball sampling technique, we expanded the sample. The data were collected by means of a pencil and paper survey. Research assistants who belonged to the same ethnic group as the entrepreneur administered the survey.

A number of different industries were represented among our sample of 54 small businesses. These industries included restaurants, auto dealers and repair shops, hair salons and retailers of beauty supplies. All of the businesses were fairly typical for ethnic businesses i.e. the businesses were in industries where the barriers to entry were low. Start-up capital requirements were also minimal. The businesses had been in existence for an average of 10.4 years, with 31 or 57.4% having sales between \$50,000 and \$500,000. The owners of the businesses were, in general, highly educated with 59.2% having a college education or better. Sixty-three percent were between the ages of 35 and 54 years old.

The 54 small businesses were located in 11 districts of Montreal. The number of businesses in each district ranged from a high of 14 to a low of 1. For each district we extracted data on percent co-ethnic in the neighbourhood, the average household income, the percentage of families that moved in the last five years and the percentage of the population that was ethnic

(Table 1). These data were assembled by the Service du développement économique et urbain de la Ville de Montréal and were based on the 1996 Statistics Canada Census.

Measures:

Co-ethnic interaction was represented by two variables. *Percent co-ethnic employees* was obtained when participants responded to the question: How many of your employees, if any, are from your own ethnic community? The percentage of the population with the same ethnicity as the small business owner represented *percent co-ethnic neighbours*.

Three variables represented neighbourhood: ethnicity, household income and stability. The data for these variables were also derived from the City of Montreal data. In order to measure *ethnicity* we created an index. The index of ethnicity consisted of the average of the percentage of visible minorities, the percentage of those who spoke a language other than French or English at home and the percentage of the population who were immigrants. The reliability of this index was estimated at $\alpha = .95$. *Household income* was the straight measure of the average family income. *Stability* was measured by the percentage of the population who had moved during the last five years.

Table 1: Characteristics of neighbourhoods in which participants were located

| | % co-ethnic in neighbourhood | % ethnic in neighbourhood | Mean household income (\$) | % mobility (past 5 years) |
|---------|------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Mean | 7.66 | 28.98 | 33,666 | 34.33 |
| Maximum | 14.55 | 43.38 | 43,884 | 43.38 |
| Minimum | 2.16 | 8.69 | 27,592 | 8.69 |

We had two measures for the product construct. The first was *level of involvement* and the second was whether the product/service was *ethnic or not*. By examining the offerings of each of the businesses represented in the sample and classifying them accordingly, we obtained the categories pertaining to level of involvement and to ethnicity. For example, a jeweler was classified as non-ethnic and high involvement whereas a Chinese restaurant was classified as low involvement and ethnic.

Finally our dependent variable, *buzz*, was measured by an index composed of four items. For one item respondents were asked to rate how effective were ads in brochures for special events, where 6 was Very Effective and 1, Not at all Effective. For the remaining three items, the participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement (1 to 6) with the following statements: my co-ethnic clients bring other clients to my business through referrals, I go out of my way to get new clients from within my ethnic community and social and religious groups in my ethnic community are an

excellent way to spread the word about my business. The measure of reliability for this index was $\alpha = .70$.

Survey Results

In order to answer our first research question, ethnic group interactions were related to the dependent variable. One significant relationship emerged: buzz was significantly correlated with percent co-ethnic employees ($R = .46$; $p = .001$). On the other hand buzz was not related to percent co-ethnics in the neighbourhood ($R = .01$; $p = .94$). When percent co-ethnic employees and co-ethnic neighbourhood was regressed on buzz, the equation as a whole was highly significant ($F = 7.48$; $p = .002$; $R^2 = .26$). As with the correlation analysis, however, only percent co-ethnic employees had a positive and significant impact on buzz. ($t = 3.81$; $p = .001$)

For our second hypothesis we correlated the three independent variables, family income, stability and ethnicity with buzz, our dependent variable. While both family income and ethnicity were negatively related to stability ($R = -.76$; $p = .001$ and $R = -.56$; $p = .001$ respectively), there was little relationship between the independent variables and buzz. Family income was marginally related to Buzz ($R = -.19$; $p = .09$) and in the expected direction. Businesses that operated in neighbourhoods with relatively low family incomes, perceived buzz as being relatively effective.

For hypothesis 3, neither the level of involvement nor whether the product was ethnic or not had any impact on buzz. The results were $R = -.13$; $p = .36$ and $R = .02$; $p = .88$ respectively.

In sum, only two of our hypotheses were supported and only partially at that. In the case of hypothesis 1, the greater the percentages co-ethnic employees, the greater the perceived impact of buzz. In the case of hypothesis 2, the lower the family income, the greater the perceived impact of buzz.

Discussion and Implications

Our investigation of the first hypothesis revealed that the greater the number of co-ethnic employees in the firm the greater was the perceived effectiveness of buzz. This is what was expected. It would appear that co-ethnic employees in the business act as channels of communication between the business and the community. Over time these employees identify with the business and its products and services and they may well be internally motivated to promote the business among potential customers. It is for this reason, business owners perceive co-ethnic employees as stimulants of buzz and word-of-mouth. The absence of any relationship, however, between the percent co-ethnic in the neighbourhood and buzz is puzzling. One would have thought that the larger the percent co-ethnics in the neighbourhood, the more buzz there would be. An examination of the co-ethnic variable revealed a great deal of variance (Mean = 7.66; Standard Deviation = 6.02) so the absence of variation as an explanation can be ruled out. This result certainly warrants further investigation, although it is possible that different businesses within the same ethnic group may very well cater to different segments of the group. Thus, what is important is not the generalized >percent co-ethnics= but rather, the group B the co-ethnic clients B who purchase from the business.

Hypothesis 2, which was built around the notion that the neighbourhood environment of the business had an impact on whether the small business owner perceived buzz to be effective, was only partially supported and the level of significance was weak. There was some indication that the lower the

average family income in the neighbourhood the more useful is buzz perceived to be. This is what we expected. What was surprising however was the absence of any relationship between our dependent variable and the ethnicity or stability of the neighbourhood. Our hypothesis on ethnicity was based on the idea that visible minorities and immigrants would share information because they face common problems, obstacles and opportunities in the host culture. This commonality does not seem to be the case. We also followed the same line of reasoning with regard to the stability of the neighbourhood. It is likely, however, that because Montreal is a city of movers (60% of the population rent) that the variance of the stability variable was insufficient to have any effect. The mean of Stability was 34.33 % and the standard deviation was 3.65.

It was indeed surprising that neither the level of involvement with the product nor the ethnicity of the product had an impact on buzz. One explanation may be that our classification, which was done post-hoc, may not have been accurate. While possible, the care with which the classification was undertaken suggests that we should elsewhere for the explanation. One explanation may lie with the view of Dye (2000) that it is the uniqueness and visibility of a product/service that influences buzz. If this is so then involvement or ethnicity may be insufficient to stimulate buzz.

Overall, the implications of this study for ethnic small businesses, is that the spontaneous development of buzz appears to take place only under specific conditions. Among the variables used in this study, lower income neighbourhoods and a high percentage of co-ethnic employees are two of these conditions. Our previous study (Dyer and Ross, forthcoming) indicated that having a high percentage co-ethnic clientele is another facilitating condition. Co-ethnic clients tend to know each other and will oftentimes recommend places to shop or products to buy. Gremler and Gwinner (2000) make the point that the personal connection between the business and its customers will strengthen the relationship. The more intense the relationship the more likely buzz concerning the business will take place. In any event, co-ethnic interactions appear to be a major condition for the development of buzz among ethnic businesses.

Understanding what leads consumers to talk about their experiences is becoming increasingly important (Swanson and Kelly, 2001). Given the relatively low cost of word-of-mouth communication and buzz and the importance of these tools to the survival of small businesses, we will continue to search for other variables that may influence the spontaneous development of buzz. Being able to identify the major variables associated with buzz will be an enormous boon to ethnic small businesses especially since so many of these organizations suffer from a severe lack of resources. We must also revisit the variables associated with the product and service offerings of the business.

It is clear that these results should be treated with caution and that more research is required. Our study was exploratory. The sample, for example, is relatively small and the members are all located in the same area of the city. In addition, this research treated five ethnic groups as homogenous. It is possible that the development of buzz varies depending on the characteristics of the ethnic group such as degree of concentration in one area, level of integration with the mainstream culture and so on. It would be interesting, therefore, to explore the issue of buzz in the context of a single ethnic group rather than assuming that all ethnic groups react in the same manner to the phenomenon.

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