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Word-of-mouth marketing can leave behind a sour taste

Exploiting friendships for commercial purposes is an unpleasant trend, write **Cordelia Fine** and **Paul Harrison**

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IN his new book, *Affluenza*, psychologist Oliver James reminds us to focus on genuine human needs rather than the excessive wants manufactured by marketing messages that leave us anxious and depressed.

Intimate and secure friendship features high on our list of true needs. Yet for those who are in the business of selling goods, friendship offers much more than the companionship, pleasure and mutual concern that can keep unhappiness at bay. For marketers, the trust that cements affection between friends is also a source of profits.

When a friend speaks of the miraculous containment qualities of a particular nappy, we immediately note the brand name on the shopping list. We trust our friend's opinion because we know it is offered with only the baby's bottom in mind, not the bottom line.

Marketers have many ways of replicating this word-of-mouth influence. One is the familiar "just like you" personality. Put the smiling, real-world personality in a domestic setting, as with the Brand Power advertisements, have another trustworthy personality interview them, and you create the impression of a sincere recommendation. Millward Brown Research found that 96 per cent of viewers found these ads believable. The setting and the people are so familiar and friendly that we lower our guard. The recommendation of a trusted personality often convinces us to try the product.

It's even more effective to get real friends to do your marketing for you, which is surprisingly easy to arrange. One baby-care company offers a modest product voucher as an incentive for so-called ambassadors, who act as middlemen for targeted marketing to their friends (whose contact details they helpfully provide to the company). Greengrocer.com.au (a subsidiary of Woolworths and Safeway) gives discounts to shoppers who recommend their friends to the online shopping site (provided those friends buy something), and football clubs have "member get member" schemes whereby members receive footy club merchandise for recruiting others.

People can even be persuaded to turn their homes into marketplaces. Marketers are well aware that friends implicitly trust each other to return favours. As the clever minds behind "party plan selling" so profitably realised, reciprocity between friends is a reliable tool. When a friend invites you to a Tupperware party, you sit on her sofa, drink her tea and eat her cake. Place yourself under this obligation and you are all but guaranteed to leave poorer than you arrived.

Lately the line between the social and the commercial has become even more blurred. Buzz agents, as they are known, are recruited by word-of-mouth companies to talk up new products to their friends and family. In return, agents get to try new stuff first, receive free samples and "build social capital by being in the know and always having something to talk about", as one US company puts it. Buzzing is well established in the US. Forty-three per cent of Fortune 500 companies have used word-of-mouth marketing campaigns of this sort, according to the Word of Mouth Marketing Association. With word-of-mouth marketing recently taking off in Britain, the buzz about buzzing clearly is spreading, although thus far it has not become pervasive in Australia.

If it does become as insidious as it is in other countries, marketing messages will be able to reach us in any social situation, even at funerals, apparently. Rob Walker, writing about these "hidden (in plain sight) persuaders" in The New York Times, describes how an agent took the opportunity of a wake for her grandfather to buzz an eye gel called No Puffery. When a relative commented on how well the agent was looking, the bereaved granddaughter responded: "No Puffery helped to keep me looking calm instead of puffy-eyed and horrible, as I felt."

The WOMMA code of ethics states that buzz agents must disclose their link with the company on whose behalf they are acting. However, it's hard to be confident that this will always happen. As one agent interviewed by Walker said: "It just seems more natural, when I talk about something, if people don't think I'm trying to push a product."

Is covert buzzing compatible with Aussie mateship? No, say philosophers Jeanette Kennett and Steve Matthews in a paper to be published in the Journal of Applied Philosophy. Influence between true friends is open, non-exploitative and unique to each friendship. We recommend a brand of sausages not because we have been sent a free sample by a buzz agency but because we think this particular friend will like them. When one friend is buzzing another, this changes the intent of the recommendation and the nature of the relationship. The social exchange is no longer quite as it seems to the deceived friend, who does not realise that the occasion "wasn't the vehicle for the friendship, as they were entitled to think. Rather, the friendship was the vehicle for the sausages. The virus destroys its host," as Kennett and Matthews put it.

Even if buzzing is open, there are good reasons to hope it doesn't take off in Australia. In genuine friendship, we are loved and valued for who we are. The security this brings, according to James, can protect us from the "influenza virus" that leaves us feeling that our worth is proportionate to our possessions.

The final frontier of friendship should not be allowed to fall to the marketers.

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