

# Communications

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GRASSROOTS COMMUNICATIONS TECHNIQUES

## Get 'Em Talking: How to Leverage Word-of-Mouth Marketing

Chatting over coffee, one friend tells the other about her positive experience at the new tire repair shop, the personalized care she received at her doctor's visit and the heartwarming experience she had helping at a nonprofit's fundraiser.

Although it may seem like simple conversation, it's actually word-of-mouth marketing — marketing that can be highly valuable, and that, with three steps, you can make work for your organization.

Anthony Cirillo, president, Fast Forward Consulting (Huntersville, NC), says: "Word-of-mouth marketing is spread by what I call 'customer crusaders,'" those who use your services, are passionate about you and recommend you to others. You can leverage word-of-mouth marketing by ensuring that those who encounter your organization have a great experience and spread the word."

To do this, Cirillo recommends the following three steps:

1. **Collect and utilize data.** Gathering information about your prospects will help you create a better experience for potential clients and possible donors, and help you better target them in your marketing efforts. To effectively and efficiently gather data and put it to good use for your cause:
  - a. Evaluate your organization's communication methods with clients as well as in-person interactions. One way to do this is by using the concept of a mystery shopper, a technique long used by retailers.
  - b. Learn more about your organization's potential and current clients and donors by encouraging them to sign up for an online newsletter. Use this opportunity to survey these people to reveal more information about them. That information should start to include their interests beyond what your organization offers and also their potential influence to spread the word about what you do.
  - c. Once you have the data, from an experience standpoint, correct any problems or issues immediately. "When an organization acts on people's concerns quickly, they notice, and they talk about it," Cirillo says.
  - d. When your organization identifies successes, publicize them. "Consider using tasteful signs or announcements that get the point across that your organization is constantly listening and improving," he says.
2. **Audit the experience.** "Take an inventory of the audiences served by your organization — clients, donors, suppliers and others. Then inventory every touch point — the point of interaction between your organization and your constituents," Cirillo says. To do this, he recommends in-depth interviews asking the interviewee to describe their "ideal experience" at your organization. Ultimately, you want to create an experience that wows your audiences.
3. **Monitor the environment.** Whether you are aware of it or not, people are talking about your organization. Cirillo says, "Google the name of your organization and see what search engines unearth about it. In addition, research negative phrases related to the industry and see if your organization pops up. Additionally, there are millions of people writing blogs. It is not only important to find positive and negative word-of-mouth but to engage in the discussion." Cirillo warns that someone could be just as passionate against your organization, and knowing who these "anti-crusaders" are is important. If you know who they are, you can build a relationship and mitigate any damage they may be doing.

"Word-of-mouth is not nebulous. It can be managed for success through a systematic process that requires rigorous data collection," Cirillo says. "The endeavor really is as simple as asking customers what they want and giving it to them."

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