



Beyond Buzz: The Next Generation of Word of Mouth Marketing

Q&A with author Lois Kelly

Q: What inspired you to write this book?

Frustration. Really smart CEOs and marketing and sales execs kept asking me, “We’ve got a great strategy and an incredible opportunity, so why don’t people get it? Why can I talk about our company but no one else can? We’ve done all this messaging and branding work, but it doesn’t seem to be sticking.” Others told me that they were frustrated because their product or business category wasn’t all that cool or innovative so they had nothing to talk about. I also kept seeing marketing and public relations people struggle to find ideas to talk about – in sales presentations, at conferences, on blogs and interviews. And, then, the huge Web 2.0 communications culture shift started snowballing, really frustrating companies who realized they would have to move from a command-and-control mindset but didn’t know where to start.

In writing the book I wanted to understand the obstacles and successfully find ways for removing them, offer practical and proven ways to engage all types of audiences in conversations, and share fascinating stories from companies that are already succeeding at conversational marketing.

Q: How do you define conversational marketing?

Conversational marketing is giving people a reason to talk about ideas, beliefs and issues that are relevant to your customers, organization or product. People like to talk about ideas, advice and points of view. They’re much more interesting than talking about product features or company capabilities. If ideas are interesting, people will remember them and talk about them.

Sun Microsystems talking about ending the digital divide by sharing technology is fascinating, and relevant to their business. Dove talking about women’s beauty coming in all shapes, sizes and ages is more interesting than talking about how their firming creams make your skin look better.

Q: Why must companies provoke conversations and what are the benefits to doing so?

We buy on trust, relationships and emotion, whether it's a \$10 lotion or a multi-million technology purchase. Conversations help us to get to know people and organizations on a human level. Do we like them? Do we trust them? Are they genuinely interested in helping us – or just selling stuff to us? Would we like working with that company? It is through conversations that we come to these conclusions.

By provoking conversations, companies can more quickly build trust and relationships, shortening sales cycles and creating meaningful differentiation on something other than their products or services.

The other part of conversations is what companies learn from them. Conversations –whether in online communities or face-to--face -- are the **best** way to tap into what customers really want. Bringing the insights back into the company is the only way to create customer experiences that keep people coming back.

Q: Your book talks about how to "make meaning: not buzz" – can you describe the differences?

Buzz is entertaining, fun, usually a creative ad or stunt of some sort, but doesn't last long and usually doesn't lead anywhere. Like Burger King's Subservient Chicken campaign that was outrageously funny but didn't increase BK's chicken sales.

On the other hand, making meaning helps people make sense of information in ways that are relevant and emotionally compelling. Educational psychologists have long used meaning making to help kids understand new ideas and those same powerful concepts apply to marketing, sales, and corporate communications.

Q: What do you think is the most misunderstood thing about how conversational marketing works?

That you need to have a cool product or be an innovative company. Or that you need to hire some specialized firm that will cost a small fortune. All organizations can engage in interesting conversations, and all have points of view that are worth talking about.

Companies just need to ask new questions to uncover these ideas, be willing to talk about insights and advice, instead of just product features and company capabilities, and be open to really listening to others' points of view on the topic as well. People in your organizations must genuinely believe in the ideas and want to listen; you can't "outsource" this to an agency in the way companies do with advertising campaigns.

Q. In your book you talk about straight talk: talk like you talk, talk like you mean it...describe some techniques for doing this?

First, avoid *Doglish* at all costs. What I mean is that often companies speak their own language of what they think is transformational, innovative, or revolutionary to customers. Yet customers

speak an entirely different language and don't have a clue what companies are talking about. (Or they know and don't care.) Sort of like when we ramble on and on to our dogs, and they look at us with this puzzled look wanting us to just say, "sit," and "treat." Talk about what customers want to know. Avoid the buzz words and self-congratulatory adjectives.

Techniques for straight talk include using the first person in talking and writing, pinpointing the intent of any communications before you start talking, sharing more "war stories," and using metaphors to help people understand new ideas.

Q. You recommend companies build a "talk culture" – and describe important functions for conversational marketing...what are three ways any company can do this now?

1. Create more ways for customers to talk directly to your company – and you with them. An online community would be one way to do this.
2. Change your fundamentals, like customer conferences and sales presentations, to be more conversational. Turn your conferences into salons where more small groups can have more meaningful conversations. Flip your sales presentation so you start with an insightful or contrarian point of view to engage the prospect in conversations, and put your usual capabilities at the end of the presentation.
3. Hire on new competencies, not the usual experience in the industry and function. Look for intellectual curiosity, new types of communications skills, a genuine passion for customers and the industry.
4. Rethink your assumptions: does a particular marketing communications function help your company better listen to customers or involve customers and market influencers in ways that speed understanding, trust building and decisions? If not, do you really need to keep doing that? There's a lot companies can stop doing.

Q: What is your favorite example of conversational marketing from the book and why?

I really like little (but prestigious) Women & Infants Hospital in Providence. A non-profit, the obstetrics and women's oncology hospital doesn't have a big budget, but they are always engaging women and people in the Southeastern New England community in fascinating conversations that relate to women's dignity and health.

Moreover, everyone in the organization "gets" that the hospital is about treating women with dignity and that understanding guides decisions big and small for all employees. Talking about dignity doesn't just guide conversations, it glues the strategy in ways that a traditional written-to-be-read mission, vision and value prop just can't do.

Q: Finally, in your book you quote David Whyte's remark, "Leaders' conversations are not about the work, they are the work." – Can you talk about how "marketing conversations" are a marketer's job?

Marketers' purpose is no longer producing things like ads, press releases, and presentations. The purpose is helping people more quickly understand and trust our organizations and products in ways that are meaningful to them. Two overlooked ways to do this are listening to

customers and making them feel heard, and making it easy for people to talk about ideas, issues and points of view. Through these conversations – listening and talking -- people become more involved, and involvement is the prerequisite to action, whether it's making a decision to buy, advocating on an organization's behalf, or just changing an opinion about an issue or product.