

# WORD OF MOUTH

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## WORD OF MOUTH

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Communication Studies, Social Psychology

### 1. Core Definition

Word of Mouth (WOM) refers to the unofficial, non-commercial channel of communication wherein information, opinions, facts, rumors, and gossip about products, services, brands, or experiences are conveyed directly from one individual to another. Functionally, it serves as an interpersonal communication mechanism that bypasses traditional, formal marketing channels. Unlike mass media advertising, which is typically one-to-many and overtly persuasive, WOM is characterized by its one-to-one or small-group nature, relying heavily on the pre-existing social relationship and trust between the sender and the receiver. The fundamental definition emphasizes its inherent unofficial status, meaning the communication is perceived by the receiver as independent of the commercial entity being discussed, thus conferring a high degree of perceived **credibility** and influence. The basic function of WOM, as seen in the source material, involves individuals discovering facts or making decisions based on personal testimony rather than institutional messaging.

In consumer behavior literature, WOM is often conceptualized as both a critical input into the decision-making process and a post-consumption behavior. As an input, it dramatically reduces the perceived risk associated with a purchase, particularly for high-involvement or complex products, because the information is filtered through a trusted social source. As a post-consumption activity, consumers are motivated to share their experiences--whether positive or negative--due to factors such as altruism, self-enhancement, or the desire for vengeance against poor service. The inherent power of WOM stems from its ability to propagate rapidly through social networks, creating a significant impact on product diffusion, brand attitudes, and ultimately, sales volume, far exceeding the typical reach and influence of standard advertising campaigns.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of communication spreading through personal testimony is arguably as old as human society itself, rooted deeply in the mechanisms of oral tradition and social learning. Before the advent of mass media and centralized advertising in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, virtually all commercial and social intelligence relied entirely on WOM. The formal academic study of WOM, however, gained traction in the mid-20th century, particularly within the field of sociology and mass communication research. Pioneering work by sociologists Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld in the 1950s introduced the "two-step flow of communication" model. This model posited that mass media messages first reach influential individuals, known as **Opinion Leaders**, who then interpret and relay this information to their social circles via interpersonal communication, which is

essentially WOM. This research established WOM as a critical mediating force between institutional messaging and public reception.

During the late 20th century, marketing researchers began systematically exploring the relationship between WOM and purchasing decisions. Studies demonstrated that consumers rely more heavily on personal influence than on formal advertising when making choices, cementing WOM's place as a powerful, albeit difficult-to-control, element of the marketing mix. The most profound recent development is the emergence of **Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)**, driven by the proliferation of the internet, social media platforms, and online review sites. This digital transformation has scaled WOM from localized, small-group interactions to global, instantaneous communications, allowing a single positive or negative opinion to influence thousands or millions of potential consumers, thereby transforming the landscape of modern marketing and reputation management.

### 3. Key Characteristics

Word of mouth communication possesses several distinguishing characteristics that grant it its potent influence over consumer behavior, differentiating it sharply from marketer-generated content. These characteristics revolve around authenticity, valence, and reach.

**High Credibility and Trust:** The primary strength of WOM lies in its perceived neutrality. Since the sender typically has no direct commercial stake in the outcome of the recommendation, the information is viewed as more honest, trustworthy, and less biased than corporate advertising. This authenticity dramatically increases the message's persuasive power, particularly when the source is a close friend, family member, or respected peer.

**Experiential Relevance:** WOM is usually grounded in a genuine, direct experience with the product or service. This practical foundation provides detailed, nuanced information that often addresses specific usage contexts, limitations, or unexpected benefits, offering utility that generalized advertising frequently lacks.

**Vividness and Emotional Valence:** WOM communications often carry significant emotional weight or "valence," meaning they are highly positive or highly negative. Highly valenced information is more memorable, more likely to be discussed, and consequently, more likely to influence attitudes. Negative WOM (NWOM) tends to be particularly powerful due to the psychological saliency of negative events (the negativity bias).

**Targeted Reach and Multiplier Effect:** Unlike broadcast media, which targets a general audience, WOM is inherently targeted, spreading through relevant social networks. Furthermore, a single initial interaction can trigger a rapid chain reaction, resulting in an exponential increase in reach, known as the **multiplier effect** or viral potential.

### 4. Mechanisms of Transmission and Diffusion

The spread of WOM is not random but follows predictable patterns determined by social structures, relational ties, and psychological drivers. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for businesses seeking to manage or amplify their market messaging.

One crucial mechanism is the nature of social ties, articulated by sociologist Mark Granovetter in his seminal work on the strength of weak ties. While **strong ties** (close friends, family) are highly influential because of their trust and intimacy, providing deep persuasion for high-risk purchases, **weak ties** (acquaintances, colleagues) are essential for broad diffusion. Weak ties act as bridges between disparate social clusters, enabling information to travel quickly across diverse groups and increasing the overall reach of the message.

Psychologically, the motivation to engage in WOM transmission is complex. Consumers share positive experiences primarily due to involvement (they genuinely like the product), altruism (they want to help others), and self-enhancement (sharing makes them feel knowledgeable or helpful). Conversely, NWOM is typically driven by the desire for vengeance, warning others, or seeking social support for a negative consumption experience. The efficiency of transmission is also heavily influenced by the product type; products that are highly visible, complex, or associated with social status tend to generate more discussion than mundane, low-involvement necessities.

## 5. Classification of Word of Mouth

In contemporary marketing analysis, WOM is generally categorized based on whether the communication occurs naturally or is initiated by the marketer, and whether it is transmitted face-to-face or digitally.

**Organic Word of Mouth (OWOM):** This is the purest form of WOM, arising naturally from genuine, unsolicited customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product or service. OWOM is the gold standard for credibility, as it is fully independent of marketing efforts. Examples include spontaneous recommendations during a conversation or an unprompted positive mention on social media.

**Amplified Word of Mouth (AWOM):** This category includes actions taken by marketers to encourage, facilitate, or stimulate WOM. This does not involve paying for fake reviews but rather creating systematic opportunities for existing customers to share their experiences. Examples include providing referral incentives, hosting exclusive events for loyal customers, or actively engaging with customer discussions in forums.

**Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM):** eWOM encompasses any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet. This includes reviews on platforms like Yelp or Amazon, posts on Twitter or Instagram, and comments in online discussion forums. eWOM is characterized by its permanence, accessibility, and high scalability.

## 6. Strategic Management and Measurement

While WOM has historically been viewed as uncontrollable, modern marketing strategies focus heavily on managing and measuring its impact. Effective management requires both minimizing negative discourse and actively stimulating positive conversation.

Minimizing **Negative WOM (NWOM)** is often achieved through robust customer service recovery processes. Rapid and effective resolution of complaints can transform a dissatisfied customer--a potential source of destructive NWOM--into a neutral or even positive advocate. Furthermore, proactive monitoring of social media and review sites allows organizations to identify and address issues before they escalate into viral crises.

Stimulating **Positive WOM (PWOM)** involves creating compelling experiences that customers feel compelled to share. This includes delivering exceptional service (going "above and beyond"), developing highly innovative products, or employing "surprise and delight" tactics. Measurement tools have become critical for quantifying WOM impact. The most prominent example is the Net Promoter Score (NPS), which classifies customers into Promoters (who generate PWOM), Passives, and Detractors (who generate NWOM) based on their likelihood to recommend the brand. Other methods include social listening tools that track brand mentions, sentiment analysis, and referral tracking programs.

## 7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its proven power, the reliance on and manipulation of WOM presents several academic and ethical debates.

One major criticism centers on the challenge of **measurement and attribution**. Because organic WOM happens in private, face-to-face settings, marketers struggle to accurately quantify its volume, trajectory, and exact causal link to sales, often relying on proxy measures like surveys or social media metrics that may not capture the full scope of interpersonal influence. This ambiguity makes justifying investment in WOM-focused strategies difficult compared to measurable media buys.

A more profound ethical debate surrounds the authenticity of eWOM, particularly regarding influencer marketing and stealth campaigns. When organizations pay individuals (influencers or bloggers) to promote products, the resulting communication blurs the line between genuine WOM and paid advertising. If the relationship is not clearly disclosed, it violates the fundamental characteristic of WOM--its perceived objectivity--and can be misleading to consumers. Regulatory bodies, such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the U.S., have implemented disclosure requirements to maintain transparency and protect consumer trust, recognizing that the intentional obfuscation of commercial ties erodes the value of WOM for all stakeholders.

## Further Reading

[Word-of-mouth marketing \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Electronic Word of Mouth \(eWOM\)](#)

[Two-Step Flow of Communication Model \(Katz & Lazarsfeld\)](#)

[Net Promoter Score \(NPS\) Official Site](#)

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