



RESEARCH IN BRIEF

What drives word-of-mouth in restaurants?

What drives
WOM in
restaurants?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyse variables that influence positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) in restaurants.

Design/methodology/approach – An experiential survey was conducted in a restaurant, located in a busy area of London. It was divided into two phases to consumers, as two potential triggers of PWOM were compared.

Findings – Satisfaction with food and drink affect PWOM significantly, as does an intangible aspect called “the power of context”. In relation to specific triggers of PWOM, surprises given before customers order have a significant impact on PWOM, but not if offered after the main course is served.

Research limitations/implications – The research was conducted in one restaurant. A cross-sectional analysis would have been beneficial, since restaurant type or occasion may affect findings. Future research will focus on what the power of context entails in restaurant settings.

Practical implications – Restaurateurs should focus their attentions on offering food and drink of consistent quality and also create something unique or distinctive in their outlets to encourage PWOM. Introducing surprises as a tactic to encourage PWOM will entail a challenging task.

Originality/value – It appears to be the first research of its type and practical actions to encourage PWOM are derived from the research.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Restaurants, Promotional methods

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Restaurants with limited promotion budgets depend mostly on positive word-of-mouth (PWOM). PWOM seems particularly important to the marketing of services (Mangold *et al.* 1999). This is because services are experiential in nature and difficult to evaluate before purchase (Wirtz and Chew, 2002). In the restaurants context there is little research, with the notable exception of a paper presented by Babin *et al.* (2005), which explores word-of-mouth (WOM) in a survey of restaurant patrons in South Korea.

Owing to this paucity of research, practitioners rely on PWOM investigations in other service environments or the advice of expert consultants. This paper will attempt to contribute in filling this research gap by examining two practical issues related to PWOM in restaurants. The first one explores what aspects of the meal experience are significant for PWOM. The second one concentrates on specific tactics to encourage PWOM.

Literature review

Conceptual background on WOM phenomena

WOM is a form of interpersonal communication amongst consumers (Richins, 1983, cited in Datta *et al.*, 2003). Practical uses of WOM are embedded in the concept of WOM



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marketing: “the promotion of a company or its products and services through an initiative conceived and designed to get people talking positively about that company . . .” (Kirby and Marsden, 2006, p. xviii). Indeed, the implications of WOM are used to good effect by marketers, as inferred from the concept of “connected marketing” (Kirby and Marsden, 2006). Mangold *et al.* (1999, p. 73) support the importance of WOM for services by describing it as “a dominant force in the marketplace”.

WOM and the decision to eat out

An explanation of why WOM is related to the decision of eating out in restaurants is provided by the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980, cited in East (1997)) (see Figure 1). In restaurant selection, the intention towards eating out in a particular place increases when positive recommendations are made, affecting referent beliefs. These beliefs seem to have important weight in the decision-making process. It seems that recommendations are widely sought and given, with food and dining being one of the leading categories according to Talktrack, an ongoing survey of American consumers (Keller, 2007).

Customers talk about restaurants, in relation to various aspects. Campbell-Smith(1967) introduced the meal experience model, which explains the elements of the restaurant offer. Cousins *et al.* (2002) classified those elements in order of importance as:

- (1) food and drink;
- (2) service;
- (3) cleanliness-hygiene;
- (4) value-for-money (VFM); and
- (5) ambiance.

The model is normally used given the lack of other frameworks.

Viral marketing

Subramani and Rajagopalan (2003, p. 300) defined viral marketing as “the tactic of creating a process where interested people can market to each other”. With the growth and evolution of the internet, electronic referrals have become an important phenomenon, with marketers trying to exploit their potential through viral marketing campaigns (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). Subramani and Rajagopalan (2003) explained

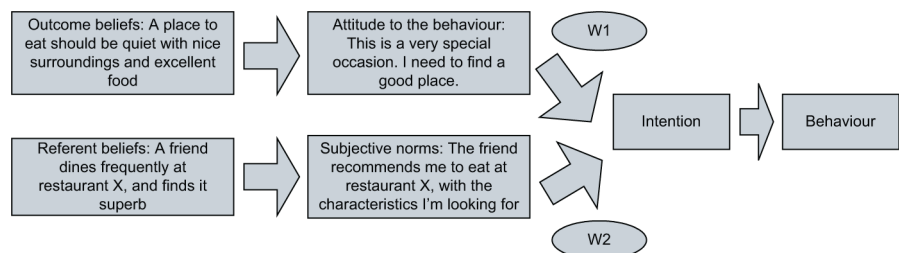


Figure 1.

Source: Fishbein and Ajzen (1980)

that the scale and scope of influence is considerably expanded because of the number of individuals connected in online social networks. It also has an enhanced effect because of the ability to connect both synchronously (e.g. instant messaging) and asynchronously (e.g. e-mail). However, some authors argue that the case for controlled PWOM through viral marketing has been overstated. Keller (2007) found that 76 per cent of WOM conversations still occur face-to-face, 17 per cent are over-the-phone and 10 per cent are on line. Fou (2008) criticised marketers' attempts to exert influence on these social networks and discourses that WOM is just something that happens naturally when customers are thrilled by an extraordinary product/service. Regardless of criticisms to viral marketing, it is necessary to indicate that this aspect of spreading the word augments the importance of PWOM in restaurant contexts.

Triggers of PWOM: The meal experience

Kivela *et al.* (1999, p. 217) found that "customers compare their actual dining experience against their expectations". This is consistent with the confirmation paradigm, "an evaluative process whereby a consumer compares a product actual performance" (Oliver, 1980, p. 403, cited in Blodgett *et al.*, 1993). This process may be decomposed of the meal experience aspects.

The aspect of customer satisfaction as a WOM antecedent is a widely researched topic. Vavra (1997, cited in Pizam and Ellis, 1999) explained that customer satisfaction is the leading criterion for determining quality delivery. For the meal experience, Quality of Food appears to be the most significant aspect (Clark and Wood, 1998). This is because people forgive more poor service than poor food quality (Denove and Power, 2006). Finkelstein (1989, cited in Auty, 1992) even suggests that Ambiance-atmosphere is as important as food/drink. Another highly rated factor appears to be value-for-money (VFM). Cousins *et al.* (2002) explain that customers have perceptions on what they are willing to pay and relate this to the different types of establishment and operation. In regards to service, Pratten (2004) conducted an experiment and found that 60 per cent of customers that received better service decided their meals had been more enjoyable. The last aspect of the meal experience to be examined is cleanliness-hygiene.

Triggers of PWOM: the tipping point

Gladwell (2000) laid out a theory, which he names "an idea" that attempts to explain changes in everyday life, including WOM phenomena. Gladwell named a number of rules that make sense of epidemics and how they go about reaching "a tipping point". One of these rules is referred as the "power of context". This is defined as an environmental argument and states that social behaviour is a function of social context. He adds that in ways people do not necessarily appreciate, the inner states are the result of outer circumstances. It is of course challenging to understand the intricacy of these states and circumstances. This paper will attempt to give a step towards exploring whether these hidden aspects can tap the potential of PWOM.

Triggers of WOM: effect of surprises

A little-explored antecedent to WOM appears to be the emotional state of the consumer. Rimé *et al.* (1991, cited in Rimé *et al.*, 2000) found that people exposed to an emotional event feel urgency to affiliate; also called the "social sharing of emotion". This

phenomenon occurs when individuals communicate frankly with others about the circumstances of the emotion-eliciting event and about their feelings. Derbaix and Vanhamme (2003) studied the emotion of surprise and the induction of WOM through eliciting surprise and found that intensity of surprise is directly correlated with WOM frequency. There seems to be practical implications of eliciting surprise as a means to induce WOM in restaurant settings. It entails an appealing trigger of WOM that will be explored.

Methodology used

The objective of the research is to establish relationships between variables (e.g. surprises and generation and WOM). In relation to the personal characteristics of respondents, diners would not want to be interrupted during their meals. For these two reasons, it is considered that an experiential survey is the most appropriate method 563 questionnaires were handed in to customers in a casual-dining restaurant located in Upper Street, Islington, in London, which very popular with diners and partygoers at dinner times and weekends. The research took place in two phases because two variables related to type of surprise were tested. A total of 109 questionnaires with usable responses were returned in the first phase and 104 in the second phase. Customers could fill them in the restaurant or post them. For postal responses, the response rate was 20.07 per cent (first phase) and 24.34 per cent (second phase). In total, 213 questionnaires were returned. All variables in this study will measure attitudes towards a particular statement using a seven-point Likert scale, with 6 being the highest agreement with the statement and 0 the lowest. The researcher handed in the questionnaires in person in order to avoid bias and monitor the research.

Findings

Issue 1: “Correlation between aspects of meal experience and PWOM”

Satisfaction of respondents with the five different aspects of the meal experience was measured. The findings were contrasted with their attitudes in regards to willingness to talk positively about the restaurant, using linear correlation. This method expresses the strength of the relationship between the aspects of the meal experience and willingness to talk positively. This is given by the coefficient *R*, which is 1 (or 100 per cent) for a perfect correlation. The coefficient *R*-squared will also provide an additional measure. *R*-squared would provide a measure of how well satisfaction with an aspect of the meal experiences explains the variation of PWOM. If *R*-squared is 1 (100 per cent), it shows to what extent satisfaction with an aspect can explain the variation of PWOM. Table I provides a summary of statistics.

Table I.
Correlation satisfaction with aspects of meal experience and engagement in PWOM

	Correlation with PWOM				
<i>R</i>	0.721	0.2045	0.424	0.238	0.085
Adjusted <i>R</i> squared	0.515	0.104	0.172	0.048	- 0.002
Significance (%)	99	99	99	98.70	Less than 95
Correlation	High	Low	Medium	Low	None
Note: <i>n</i> = 213					

Food and drink is the most significant contributor to WOM and it is correlated 72 per cent with the generation of PWOM and its *R*-squared is 52 per cent. This means that 52 per cent of PWOM can be attributed to satisfaction with food. Other aspects do not appear to correlate with PWOM sufficiently. For instance VFM is correlated at 42 per cent, service was modestly correlated (23.8 per cent) and cleanliness had a negligible correlation of 8.5 per cent. Their values for *R*-square are rendered meaningless for practical terms. Ambiance, an aspect mentioned by researchers as important, appeared to be insignificantly correlated to PWOM (20.45 per cent). This rather unexpected result required validation. It could mean that by bundling ambiance with the other factors, respondents may perceive it as less important. A separate question was included in the questionnaire in order to test what Gladwell (2000) called “the power of context”. This may include intangible aspects such as ambiance/atmosphere as well. Intangibility was made meaningful for respondents by measuring attitudes towards the statement “there is something particular about the restaurant you would like to share with friends and acquaintances”. That particularity was contrasted with the willingness to engage in PWOM (Table II). A significant correlation value of 69 per cent was found with a statistical reliability of 99 per cent, with *R*-squared being 47 per cent. These findings appear to confirm the importance of the power of context.

Issue 2: “Eliciting surprises and WOM”

For the research, it was considered that surprises could mean offering extra items to customers. The willingness to engage in PWOM was contrasted with the effect of “surprises”. In the first phase, customers were given free drinks (liqueur/ coffees) at the end of the meal. The decision of giving these free items was based on reasonable bills. In contrast, during the second phase these items were given when ordering and informing that the drinks were free-of-charge. Therefore, two groups of consumers were compared in two phases: those receiving surprises and those without surprises. A test that allows to measure differences in groups and that is considered statistically robust is the one-way Anova test. Table III summarises the findings.

For the first phase, assumptions for the test were not broken. As Sig. *F* (0.597) was higher than 0.05, it is concluded that surprises given at the end of the meal do not affect generation PWOM significantly.

Pearson correlation value	0.688	Table II. Correlation tests between uniqueness and PWOM behaviour
Significance	0.99	
Adjusted <i>R</i> squared	0.471	
Note: <i>n</i> = 213		

	Frequency	%	Mean WOM	Table III. One-way ANOVA-test: surprises at end of meal and WOM behaviour
Group 1: No surprises given	62	56.9	4.86	
Group 2: Surprises given	47	43.1	4.77	
Total	109	100.0		
Notes: <i>p</i> = 0.277; <i>F</i> = 0.281, Sig. <i>F</i> : 0.597; BASE: First phase: 109 usable questionnaires; <i>n</i> = 109				

For the second phase, see Table IV. Here, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was broken. Since the test is very robust, it was decided to consider the high significance of 94.1 per cent (not 95 per cent previously considered) and conduct two additional tests (Welch and Brown-Forsythe). These tests with a significance of 0.035 (lower than the 0.05 threshold) confirmed highly significant differences in the group that was given surprises. It implies that surprises given at the start of meals do have a significant impact on the generation of PWOM.

Conclusions

A clear link between satisfaction with food and drink as a key driver of PWOM was found. Other meal experience factors appear to be of little importance. However, using the “meal experience” model as the only basis to correlate generation of PWOM and satisfaction with ambiance appeared of insufficient methodological rigour. For this reason, exploring the aspect of ambiance from another perspective appears to be the answer. It meant to rephrase the question to customers in order to find out if the place had something unique, distinctive or particular. This appeared to prove that “the power of context” is key for the generation of PWOM as a strong correlation between this uniqueness/distinctiveness – or power of context- and PWOM generation was found. In regards to specific tactics to drive PWOM, the research examined the introduction of surprises. Interestingly, surprises given at the start of meal – this meaning before the food was served – influenced generation of PWOM significantly; whereas if given towards the end of the meal – this meaning after the main course-, they appear to have no influence at all. The intensity of surprise is higher when starting the meals, which explains their influence on PWOM generation.

Practical implications

First of all, this paper confirms that for generating PWOM, most efforts must be devoted towards the tangible product offered (food/drink). In addition, restaurateurs should try variations of elements that may cause “stickiness” in the minds of consumers. It means to create something that customers perceive as unique or distinctive.

Introducing surprises such as given customers something free – unexpected for customers – help generate more PWOM. At this point a word of caution is needed. Widespread use of surprises may affect the intensity of the surprise and its connection with PWOM generation. Surprises can then become the norm expected by consumers, particularly repeat customers. During the research, there was a careful introduction of surprises at places of the restaurant. It is suggested to experiment with elements that may provide a high intensity surprise to customers, towards the start of the meals. The

	Frequency	%	Mean WOM
Group 1: No surprises given	61	58.7	4.67
Group 2: Surprises given	43	41.3	5.12
Total	104	100.0	

Table IV.
One-way ANOVA-test:
surprises at start of meal
and WOM behaviour

Notes: $p = 0.021$; $f = 3.633$, Sig F: 0.059; Robust tests of equality of means: Welch (Significance) 0.035; Brown-Forsythe (Significance) 0.035; BASE: 104 usable questionnaires (second phase) $n = 104$

implementation of this surprise strategy is riddled with challenges. Customers may have the opposite reaction, particularly if cultural differences are involved. On the other hand, service-people must be appropriately trained and should understand its importance, not confounding it with an additional task. Indeed, a hastened and poorly implemented strategy can have the opposite effect. In order to overcome these challenges a number of practices are suggested. Whenever possible, it is advisable to pilot the introduction of a proposed strategy with a small number of diners, preferably known to the restaurateur. In addition, it is vital to involve managers and staff on the proposed strategy and discuss thoroughly about how the strategy is to be implemented. Rehearsals and training should be prior to surprise introductions. The strategy should be carefully monitored. It is also suggested that a particular surprise run for limited time periods. The research was conducted in a three-month period, with the second type of surprise introduced at half of that period with the effect of the surprises still high. This may serve as an indication but further research is required.

Areas for further research

This is considered to be a research that points towards the need to investigate various issues. First, the processes to explain why/how people engage in PWOM through various means (blogs, e-mails, chat-rooms), and viral marketing processes are areas of extraordinary importance, but beyond the scope of this study. Second, the paper indicates the need to further explore what the power of context entails, as it was only explored as something that customers found unique or distinctive. Third, practical issues surrounding surprises should be investigated once this tactic is implemented. Research could have benefited from a cross-sectional analysis of different type restaurants and consumers eating out for different purposes/occasions. However, in spite of its limitations, as the first research of its type, it seems to have interesting findings with obvious practical implications.

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