

# PROMO

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Written by Stuart Sheldon, President, Escalate Atlanta

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## Don't Lose Sight of Reality When It Comes To Word-of-Mouth

Disclosure: I drink the word-of-mouth (WOM), and especially Off-line WOM, Kool-aid. Evidence of my bias include the fact that I sit on the board of directors of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) and am a partner in Escalate, a marketing agency that focuses on Experiential and WOM marketing, predominantly in the Off-line world.

No doubt about it, On-line WOM is white hot these days. Just think of all you've seen & heard about On-line WOM: Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Foursquare the hot new widget, FTC Disclosure Guidelines, and on and on. We're all understandably quite excited about On-line WOM, and there is no doubt it is both of value and here to stay. But what about off-line WOM? Is it lost in all our excited conversations about On-line WOM? Most importantly, is Off-line WOM worth a cherished PROMO magazine article topic?

As I prepared for this article, I discussed the topic with Ed Keller, co-founder of word-of-mouth research and consulting shop Keller Fay Group (KFG) and author of *The Influentials*. Ed immediately answered that yes, Off-line is definitely worthy of space in PROMO. Keller reminded me of several interesting headlines from a 2008 study from KFG & media agency OMD:

- Off-line is the predominant mode of WOM across all age groups, ranging from 80% among the youngest group to 97% among the oldest
- WOM expressed face to face and by phone also is viewed as highly "credible" more often than On-line talk (59% vs. 49%)
- Off-line WOM is more likely than On-line to lead to strong purchase intent (50% vs. 43%)

So careful analysis of national panel data by professional WOM researchers says that Offline WOM is more persuasive than Online? As a marketer, seems like a great reason to talk about Off-line WOM.

But what results do we see within individual programs? Do the themes come through?

Fortunately, many Escalate clients value both Experiential and Word-of-Mouth marketing enough to invest a portion of their budget in third-party measurement. This gives us a bank of case studies we can examine to answer that question.

One Escalate program, (third-party measurement by ChatThreads) demonstrated the relative persuasive advantage of Off-line WOM:

Even amongst those not directly part of our program, the #1 driver of WOM about the client brand in activated cities was the program itself. As a matter of fact, the program (Off-line, FYI) was the *only* conversation driver that showed a statistically significant correlation to WOM, regardless of type.

Off-line WOM included key brand messages (think “Tastes Great...Less Filling”) at a rate twenty times higher than On-line conversations.

Looks like this example confirms the power of Off-line WOM to spark brand-building conversation, even among those not directly involved in the program.

In another Escalate program, measured by IMI International,

Participants reported forms of Off-line WOM as the #1 (at home with family/friends; 71%) and #2 (out socially with friends; 50%) means by which they shared their brand experience. Forms of On-line WOM (e-mail, instant messages, digital social networking sites, blogs, etc.) totaled less than 10%.

Why does Off-line WOM deliver an advantage over On-line when it comes to persuasiveness? Here’s my theory: physical proximity, eye contact and live human voices. Rocket science, I know.

Taped to the wall above my desk is one corner of a print ad from an international airline. I tore it out of the July 15, 2009 issue of The New York Times for this headline: “95% of business people agree that face-to-face meetings are key to building long-term relationships.” The source was a Harvard Business Review reader poll. It was a full-page ad and I only saved the headline, so unfortunately I can’t give credit to the brand who paid for the ad. The key message of the creative stuck, however: get out from behind your conference calls, e-mail trails and video chat cameras and *sit with your customers*. Why? Because your physical presence makes a key impact. I think the same may be true for Off-line WOM “versus” On-line.

None of this means On-line WOM is bad; far from it. On-line WOM is good (unless it’s bad, but even Off-line WOM can be bad, which is not good, right?) Just don’t pat yourself on the back in congratulations for a comprehensive WOM program unless you ensure you address BOTH On-line and Off-line WOM. Client and/or agency, challenge yourselves: make sure strategies, objectives, tactics and measurement address both.

My hypothesis is that a WOM marketing program that combines Off-line and On-line WOM offers the best possible overall results. But that is a topic for a future PROMO article. For now, I’m off to catch a flight. Can’t wait to sit with a client and talk about their brand with them!