

DAVID ROWAN

David Rowan has been editor of **The Jewish Chronicle** since May 2006. He also writes a weekly **trend-watching column** in The Times Magazine. This site features his recent writing as the Evening Standard's **media interviewer**, a **magazine feature writer** for The Sunday Times, Telegraph and Times magazines, and an **op-ed writer** for The Times. He contributes film reports to Channel 4 News and comments on radio and television. Trained at The Times, he edited The Guardian's websites and its op-ed, education, analysis and Saturday features sections. He launch edited The Editor magazine for The Guardian and Public Agenda and Career for The Times.

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Trendsurfing: Buzz marketing (The Times)

By David Rowan

Derek Archambault has chatted a lot about sausages this week. Al Fresco Chicken Sausages, to be specific, a brand the 28-year-old dairy-company executive from Rhode Island keeps throwing casually into conversations with friends or at the office water-cooler. They may not realise that Al Fresco has paid thousands of dollars for "brand evangelists" such as Derek to talk up its range among those "who know and trust them". He has been briefed, after all, that it is his decision alone whether to tell friends, family and colleagues about the financial transaction that underlies his culinary passion.

Although Derek has received no money - his reward comes as free samples and gifts - he has "buzzed" the sausages no less enthusiastically. "I had a party, served them, and people were saying, 'Wow, this is a good sausage!'," he explains. "It's a very natural communication. You're supplied with coupons, and if you happen to be talking to someone about food, well, you can bring sausages into the discussion."

This is the 17th campaign Derek has buzzed for a Boston-based agency called BzzAgent, using his personal social network to hype Penguin books, spam-blocking software, even an airline's frequent-flier scheme. In doing so, he has earned "BzzPoints" redeemable against shirts, CDs, even boxing accessories. But a greater motivation for Derek is the chance to stay ahead of the curve. "I love being the first in my group to know about the latest music,

movies or restaurants, and I'd spread the word anyway," he says. So if BzzAgent's latest product happens to impress him, he will happily add his "real and true personal endorsement".

In two years, BzzAgent has grown into a network of 51,000 word-of-mouth promoters, their low-level buzz boosting Kellogg's cereals, Lee jeans and Ralph Lauren fragrances. An eight-week campaign involving 1,000 agents - half are over 25; two-thirds are women - can cost Â£50,000. Yet so great is demand, according to the agency's founder, Dave Balter, that a London office will open this autumn. "There's no question that this is coming to the UK," Balter says. "We've been approached by British businesses in the media space, in fragrance, in publishing, who want us to work for them. We know it's needed."

Dave stresses that this is "honest" word-of-mouth, as opposed to "roach" marketing, which sets out to hoodwink consumers. Sony Ericsson, for instance, hired 60 street actors to play tourists wanting their pictures taken; when passers-by obliged, they were handed the latest "easy to use" camera phone. Other agencies have placed models in bars to promote vodka and sent actors on to buses to talk loudly about "fantastic" leisure attractions. Funnily enough, Dave initially presumed that his recruits too would have to mislead people. "But we found that if they liked the products, they'd become evangelists and would happily talk about them honestly. That gives the products more validity."

And now British marketers are clamouring for buzz. "It's nothing new for the music industry here to create 'e-teams' to seed chatrooms with positive comments," says Jez Jowett at the London agency Cake. "Word-of-mouth marketing influences us more than anything else at the moment, and it can only grow."

Yet ... isn't this simply the commercialisation of human relationships? "It's using social networks not for commercial purposes, but because people feel strongly enough to get involved," insists Dave Balter. "There are no obligations to do anything cynical." Nor does Derek Archambault have any qualms. "It's not obnoxious or unnatural," he says, "just legitimate feedback from one friend to another about a product I like. And I get to maintain my status as a buzzer who knows the greatest new stuff out there."

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