



ENERGIZING BRAND  
ADVOCATES AND  
INCREASING YOUR  
SOCIAL MEDIA ROI



## Energizing Brand Advocates and Increasing Your Social Media ROI

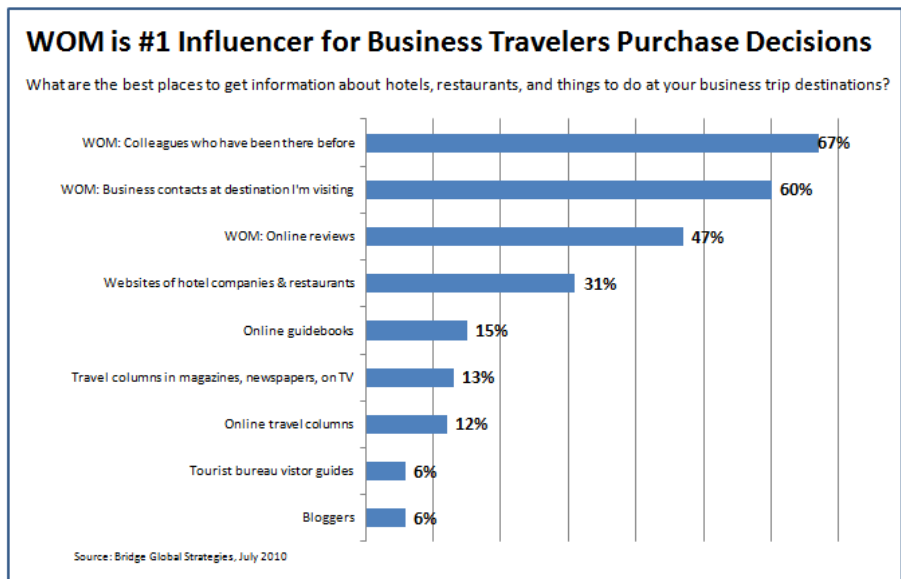
By Taryn Schneider

Hotel marketers dedicate precious resources – dollars, time and energy – luring and converting new customers. Often, their most valuable marketing resource is overlooked: brand advocates. This powerful segment of influential and passionate people is already singing your praises. They are more than just happy or satisfied customers. Brand advocates are ultimate promoters who love your brand and are poised to recommend it, and convert others to it, through positive word of mouth, both online and off. Fueled by social media and driven by passion and trust, advocates are mighty messengers and influencers.

As the social web redefines engagement, it has created new opportunities to touch customers in meaningful ways and build lasting relationships based on honesty and trust. Consumers are engaging with their favorite brands, and as a result, shaping brands through their advocacy. Identifying and energizing your brand advocates can bring you the ultimate prize – potent fuel for your sales and marketing efforts.

### When Advocates Recommend...

When advocates recommend, brands grow. McKinsey & Co. reports that 90% of advocates write something positive about their purchasing experience; 40% of consumers recommend brands according to Comscore; and a study by Forrester Research Inc. says that while only 14% of consumers trust online ads, 94% trust word of mouth, making it among the most influential, cost effective and high return forms of marketing.



The power of your brand has typically been defined by who you are and what you do to tell consumers about yourself. Yet today, your brand is very much influenced by what “they” say. Consumers are interconnected with influence that runs rampant as social platforms provide them with a powerful voice. They give their opinions and recommendations through blogs, tweets, and Facebook updates in addition to dinner party discussions, and at the office water cooler. Your brand’s voice goes only so far, but when the message comes from a brand advocate, its power is intensified.

### The Value of a Brand Advocate: Priceless

Zuberance estimates that brand advocates are worth at least 5 times more than average customers and they spend at least twice as much. Add that to the fact that 90% of consumers trust word of mouth while only 33% trust online ads (Nielsen), and it’s clear that word of mouth as a marketing tactic is significantly more trusted and influential.

Forrester Research Inc. reports that each post on the social web by a brand advocate reaches 150 people, and there are more than 500 billion word of mouth impressions on the social web each year in the U.S. alone. You can't buy this kind of advertising, but you need to claim your share of it. Whether your goal is to spread positive word of mouth, stimulate brand engagement, increase qualified leads, traffic and bookings, or increase online ratings, reviews and recommendations, the benefits of brand advocacy are compelling.

#### **CASE STUDY**

*In a recent guest survey, a national hotel chain had 57% of guests say they are highly likely to recommend the brand. With over 2 million guests annually, the company may have 1.1 million brand advocates that can be engaged, mobilized and optimized.*

#### **Can I Get Your Number?**

With so much influence in the hands of consumers, companies need to seek out and energize those that have an affinity for your brand. The highly-satisfied customers who tout your products and services are the evangelists to whom you must pay attention.

To find them, start with your current guests and ask them one simple question: "How likely are you to recommend our product or services to friends and colleagues?" Those who answer 9 or 10 on a scale of 0 to 10 (with 10 being the most likely) are your advocates.



Ask them this question regularly – in follow-up emails to guests just after their stay; in tweets and status updates on your fan page; in banners and links on your website; in email newsletters or through an online community. Place "recommend" badges and widgets on your website, and use sound media listening tools to hear who picks up your banner. Offline, you can seek them out on property via tent cards at registration, in restaurants, the spa, etc. Once they go home, include the question in post-visit direct mail.

While proactively pursuing advocates, companies often overlook their employees. They are the closest to your brand (with the most intimate knowledge) and are out daily interacting with people.

No matter what route or combination of routes you follow to identify your advocates, always capture their name, email address, and other online and offline contact information so that you can effectively engage with and mobilize them.

#### **The Care and Feeding of Brand Advocates**

Meet your advocates where they are to nurture and engage them. Identify what platforms they're already active on and start a conversation. Look for them on social networks where they're posting reviews, publishing videos, voting and checking in. Listen, engage, invite feedback and interact with dialog that empowers their voice. They want to be listened to and feel valued and appreciated, so pay close attention to what they're saying about you, react to their experiences and be relevant to their lifestyle. With that attention, they will be eager and confident to spread the word and be champions

of your brand. Once you're in their space, have multiple channels and tools available to foster feedback.

### Leveraging the Power of Word of Mouth

It's not just about amassing fans, followers and friends, but it's what you do with them that creates value. Once you've identified a brand advocate, the next step is to energize them to drive positive word of mouth, and, ultimately, bookings.

There are some effective ways to mobilize brand advocates:

- **Ratings & Reviews:** Guests trust guests, not marketers, so consumer reviews that come from advocates can be powerful. In fact, their recommendations are a leading influencer of travelers' purchase decisions. Nielsen reports that after friends and family, the number one driver for brand trust is online reviews and feedback from the social media space, and according to Deloitte, 77% of travelers say they rely on consumer reviews.
  - Provide online tools for your advocates that make it easy for them to write reviews and publish directly on travel sites.
  - Never pay or incent advocates to write reviews. Under no circumstances should you edit reviews or "coach" advocates on what to write.

#### CASE STUDY

*A full service hotel management and development company is asking its advocates to write reviews. To date, the average star rating for reviews written by the hotel's advocates is 4.5 out of 5 stars. This higher rating increased the average star ratings for the property on travel sites from 3 to 4.25 stars in less than one month.*

- **Testimonials:** Encourage advocates to share testimonials or stories about their positive experiences. While similar to reviews, this approach tends to be more about personal and memorable moments guests want to share about a specific event or experience as opposed to a ranking or review of their stay.
  - Suggest a topic or category to encourage advocates to share. For instance, ask business travelers how your hotel helped make their business trip a success.
  - Provide simple tools that allow advocates to share stories in a variety of formats – from written testimonials to photo slideshows and short videos.
- **Connecting with Prospects:** To the inquiring consumer, advocates can be the most trusted source of information, so engage them to answer questions from prospects and future guests.
  - Place an online form on your website that prospects can use to submit their questions, which are automatically sent to advocates to respond. Return the answers to prospects with a promotional call to action.

#### CASE STUDY

*An online vacation rental company used an online form to field prospective customers' questions. Sixty-eight percent of its brand advocates have answered at least one question from prospects. On average, prospects get 17 answers for each question asked. The company estimates that it has generated \$250,000 in bookings since it launched this initiative, a 20X ROI.*

- **Sharing and Participating:** Make it easy for advocates to share your content (such as videos, photos, updates and promotional offers) with their social networks to drive leads and sales. Provide a place for them to upload photos and videos, create contests and ask them to share their experiences and offer feedback on how you can serve them better. Encourage them to respond to blog postings, and provide exclusive and unique offers that they can share with their social networks and get their friends to join your loyalty club.
  - Give brand advocates compelling, unique offers that they will want to share with their social networks. These offers should not be the same as those that already are being shared with all customers.
  - Include widgets that make it easy for advocates to share your content and offers in multiple ways, including via email, Facebook, and Twitter.
- **Reward for Loyalty:** Your advocates are your champions because they trust and value you, but it doesn't hurt to let them know that you recognize and appreciate them. They need to be nurtured and you need to keep working to be a brand they advocate. But, as mentioned earlier, never pay them for their advocacy – true, authentic advocacy cannot be bought.
  - Offer exclusive forums, private memberships or special website features available only to identified brand advocates.
  - Give your brand advocates exclusive access to a top executive, celebrated chef or VIP events.
  - Let them be the first to know about new products and services, grand openings, menu debuts and great deals.

### Is It Worth It?

As with any marketing effort, when planning a brand advocacy program, there will be some costs. The basics to account for are the manpower to create and launch programs and campaigns, software applications, web development, and the cost of promotional offers and programs.

The only way you can know for sure that your brand advocacy strategy is working is by tracking, measuring, evaluating and optimizing your efforts. Create a tactical strategy with concrete goals, and tie your activities to an end game so you can calculate your ROI.

Track analytics and optimize results in real-time. Some metrics to consider include the number of advocates identified, total reviews created and/or shared, average star ratings, conversion rate for shared offers, leads by source, estimated number of word of mouth impressions, estimated sales from word of mouth impressions, and much more.

### Influencing the Influencer

The top five business objectives related to social media according to a Deloitte survey are: increase word-of-mouth, increase customer loyalty, increase brand awareness, improve idea generation and improve the quality of customer support – all objectives that are linked to brand advocacy. In this era of multi-touch marketing, it's time you figured out how you can influence the influencer.

### Getting Started

As you develop a strategy for identifying and energizing your brand advocates, keep in mind the best practices and keys to success:

- Don't pay or provide financial incentives in exchange for recommendations.

- Make it easy for your advocates to recommend you. Provide convenient, easy-to-use online tools that make it easy for enthusiastic guests to create and publish reviews.
- Give brand advocates multiple ways to evangelize your brand. For instance, in addition to reviews, encourage them to create testimonials, answer prospects' questions, and share offers with their social networks.

**CASE STUDY – Boutique Hotel Company Energizes its Brand Advocates**

One of the nation's fastest-growing owner/operators of stylish boutique hotels is working to increasing occupancy rates and ADR.

The hotel enjoys a high level of loyalty and advocacy: 75% of the hotel's guests are likely to return and willing to recommend the hotel to others. However, the company was not systematically energizing them to drive positive word of mouth and sales.

In the second half of 2010 the company conducted a pilot of Zuberance's Brand Advocate Platform to encourage 13,500 previously identified advocates of two of the company's hotels to:

1. Rate and review the hotels.
2. Publish and/or share reviews on TripAdvisor, Yelp, Facebook, Twitter, and via email.
3. Share promotional reviews with friends and colleagues.

After approximately four months:

- Brand advocates created 652 reviews with an average star rating of 4.5 out of 5 stars.
- Brand advocates published 93 reviews to TripAdvisor, increasing the hotels' star ratings by one-half to one star. Reviews were also shared on Yelp, Facebook, Twitter and via email.
- Brand advocates shared a unique offer (\$50 credit) 50 times with their social networks.
- An estimated \$280,000 in revenues has been the result of TripAdvisor bookings since the boutique hotel started the pilot. This is a **19 times Return on Investment**.

## Useful Links & Reading

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### Digital Marketing on HSMIAI's eConnect

A one-stop portal to global information and resources on digital marketing available exclusively to HSMIAI members.

### Zuberance

The Zuberance Advocate Platform is a hosted word of mouth solution that enables companies to identify and energize brand advocates at scale, driving measurable increases in qualified leads, sales, and advocacy. Zuberance customers include leading consumer and business brands worldwide.

– [www.zuberance.com](http://www.zuberance.com) –  
– @Zuberance –

### What is the Value of a Brand Advocate?

Blog post examining the challenges to engaging brand advocates from Edelman Digital

### A new breed of brand advocates: Social Networking redefines customer engagement

A 2010 report from Deloitte that summarizes activities to consider in maintaining and growing brand advocates

### What is the value of a Facebook Fan? Zero!

Blog post examining Facebook fan valuation from Forrester.com

### The Power of Brand Advocates

Slideshare presentation from LBi Belgium

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## Related Tools to Consider

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### Reputation Management Tools

- Social Mention – [www.socialmention.com](http://www.socialmention.com)
- Google Alerts – [www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts)
- Trackur – [www.trackur.com](http://www.trackur.com)

### Radian 6

offers a platform to listen, measure, and engage in conversations with customers across the social web so you can locate people with influence ([www.radian6.com](http://www.radian6.com))

### Klout

lets you identify mass influencers within your category (based on topic or hashtag), analyze their level of influence and understand their network value ([www.klout.com](http://www.klout.com))

### Collective Intellect

gathers real time market information and provides insight into consumer opinions ([www.collectiveintellect.com](http://www.collectiveintellect.com))

### Brands Eye

an online reputation monitoring tool that allows you to tap into key insights so you can make decisions and harness positive word of mouth ([www.brandseye.com](http://www.brandseye.com))

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