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The Buzz on Buzz

By [JONAH LEHRER](#)

As its premiere approached back in 1999, "The Sixth Sense" looked like a sure loser. Walt Disney Co. had already sold off some important rights to the film. Few in Hollywood expected the movie to earn back its \$40 million budget, especially since it wasn't going to be supported by a large ad campaign.

But "The Sixth Sense" ended up being a smash hit. Teenagers couldn't stop talking about the film's trailer, which featured a young boy uttering the line: "I see dead people." And so, before a single review had been written, the movie became the subject of countless conversations. It ended up grossing more than \$670 million world-wide.

In recent years, the subject of buzz has generated a burst of scientific attention, as researchers try to understand why having lots of people talk about a brand of jeans, or a new smart-phone, makes the products so much more likely to succeed in the marketplace. The new buzz research demonstrates that we're much less autonomous than we imagine. Everything we do is shaped by everyone else.



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Brian Uzzi, a sociologist at Northwestern University, has helped to pioneer the study of buzz. A few years ago, he stumbled upon the perfect data set: a private survey of more than 180,000 people who were interviewed about 338 movies, including "The Sixth Sense," between March 1999 and August 2001. By comparing their responses to a long list of other variables, such as the advertising budget of the film and its box-office performance, Mr. Uzzi hoped to better understand the reality of buzz. Was it driven by marketing? How did it spread? And did it really matter?

Mr. Uzzi was most interested in pre-release buzz, when people like to speculate. Perhaps we saw a trailer of the film or have a crush on the lead actor. "Because this buzz isn't based on actual experience, it takes a lot of it to influence our behavior," Mr. Uzzi says. "It only works when the buzz is everywhere." For Hollywood movies, the crucial tipping point occurs, he found, when 21% of Americans are buzzing about the film. Once that line is reached, levels of pre-release buzz directly predict box-office performance in the crucial opening weekend and afterward.

The question, of course, is what generates buzz in the first place. Mr. Uzzi's answer should strike fear into studio executives' hearts: He found virtually no relationship between levels of pre-release buzz and the ad budget of the movie or the presence of highly paid actors, even if millions of dollars were spent. The data suggest that pre-release buzz is mostly unpredictable, driven by intangible factors like the originality of the premise, the title of the film, or even a throwaway line in the trailer.

The new buzz research has important implications for marketing. While the old model of advertising is all about reaching individual consumers—that's why companies spend millions for a 15-second Super Bowl ad—Mr. Uzzi argues that future strategies should focus on getting consumers to spread the message themselves. "Thanks to social-networking sites, kids today are more connected than ever," he adds. "They're also much better at ignoring conventional ads, which means that the only way to reach them is with buzz."

At the moment, the science is short on practical recommendations. As Mr. Uzzi notes, the most cost-effective way to generate buzz is to make an exciting product, to create something that people want to talk about. It doesn't matter if it's a critically acclaimed movie or a new piece of technology. Mr. Uzzi cites Apple as a master of the technique: "They really know how to get people talking," he says. "In part, it's the secrecy and showmanship. But Apple also benefits from the fact that a lot of people liked their previous products."

Another success story is the marketing campaign for "Toy Story 3," spearheaded by Oliver Lockett at Disney's Digisynd. At first glance, the Pixar film posed a serious challenge, since it had been more than a decade since the release of "Toy Story 2." Mr. Lockett's strategy focused on creating feelings of nostalgia among college students. "We created montages of the previous films and seeded them on YouTube," he says. "We organized free screenings for students on Facebook. We highlighted the right messages on Twitter." One nostalgic tweet about the movie written by a fan was viewed more than 114 million times. (The fan was later invited to the British premiere.) Thanks to the spread of buzz, an old cartoon franchise about toys has become the highest-grossing film of the year.

For too long, we've tried to understand ourselves in isolation, as we test people one at a time in the psychology lab or rely on their past preferences to predict behavior. But these conditions and algorithms are artificial. In the real world, we are deeply intertwined with each other, dependent on our social networks for all sorts of advice. If it weren't for the buzz of strangers, we wouldn't even know what movie to pick at the multiplex.

—Jonah Lehrer is the author, most recently, of "How We Decide." His column appears every other week.

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