



**Exclusive
Excerpt**

**Available Only
To BzzAgents**

Those readers familiar with word-of-mouth marketing (WOM) will recognize that this conversation is typically grounded in the core principles of how to do word-of-mouth marketing. A good example of how one company used word-of-mouth marketing to create an authentic identity is BzzAgent, one of the most conversational companies ever created.

Notes from the Central Hive

The first sign that BzzAgent is a company unlike any other comes with your very first call to the head office in Boston. As you are being transferred to the person you wish to speak with, you are put on hold and then suddenly thrust into an ongoing conversation, instead of the usual background music, as a participant in a conference call. Confused, your first thought is probably that you must have been transferred by mistake into a boardroom discussion. So you try to speak up, but no one answers.

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Slowly, you realize that being thrown into this conversation is BzzAgent's not so subtle way of telling you that they do things differently. As Dave Balter, founder of BzzAgent, explains, "Most companies want to believe their personality can be shaped by revamping their logo or updating their Web site. But these are superficial adjustments; behavior is the foundation that creates personality."

At BzzAgent, behavior means everything from having a determined (some call it angry) bee for a logo to calling their head office the "central hive." Each element embodies a distinct choice. As Balter further describes, "While BzzAgent's brand stands for WOM, our personality is comprised of something incredibly different: innovation and transparency." So when the company received a large chunk of venture capital funding from investors in December 2005, they had the perfect recipe for losing the identity they had worked so hard to build—lots of cash and a coming influx of many employees in a short time frame. For Balter, there was only one way to grow and stay true to the core belief of BzzAgent, and that was by making sure all of his employees and customers were watching.

To do this, he sent an e-mail to John Butman, his friend and coauthor of *Grapevine*, hoping to launch an experiment in what he called "organizational transparency."

From: Dave Balter, BzzAgent, Inc.
To: John Butman
Subject: Project on My Mind, I Can't Shake
Date: Thu, 05 Jan 2006 23:10:37 -0500

Doc —

I got an idea.

What do you think about a 3 month on-staff writing gig at BzzAgent.

It's simple. The company just got about \$15 million in funding [true].

I want to have you document the company for 3 months—in writing. To the world. We'll set it up as a blog—people can respond to the daily postings.

You hang out in the office. Write about the real internal workings. What's really happening.

It's like a reality show. But written. Cheap to produce. Fun to watch. We take the idea of the BeeLog and we turn it up a dozen notches. In real time. Do something no company has ever done before.

We could get very creative with this. Plus, I think you'd like the energy in the office right now—and would enjoy your energy around as well. [you can certainly work on other projects while there, if you want].

You in?

Dave

Butman agreed—and over the next 90 days, he dutifully chronicled the growth of the company. There were blog posts on everything from the excitement of moving to a new office location, to the personal stories of individual employees based in far-flung locations. Reading it, you understood what it was like to work at BzzAgent. It was real.

The blog has been up and running for over a year—and BzzAgent has continued to grow and make unique choices that fuel loyalty among their agents and make the brand something worth talking about. One element that may be most central to how BzzAgent differs from most organizations is how they use internal communication to create an exciting, productive workplace. Employees are encouraged to blog and share their thoughts not just with one another, but also with the outside world.

Seth Minkin, a longtime BzzAgent collaborator and recently appointed Artist-in-Residence is the unofficial voice of BzzAgent, through his many drawings and contributions to the culture of the Central Hive. Below is an example of one drawing he did as part of a project called The Bento Box designed to “balance corporate transparency with creative freedom,” in which BzzAgent employees shared thoughts with each other about the state of the company and what it stood for. The drawing’s theme was decided on collaboratively by the company’s employees.

Minkin is just one member of the team who has become an unofficial spokesperson for the brand. Another is BzzAgent Jono, who is the one member of the Central Hive that is on a first-name basis with most of the several hundred thousand “agents” now registered on the site. The reason is that Jono (pronounced “John-o”) is the one who communicates



NO SHIFTY BZZ PRACTICES

updates to all of them, and sends the initial letter to them when they first join a campaign.

When any BzzAgent makes it to the home office or sees a video online, the most often expressed reaction is surprise. People don’t expect Jono to be a real person. When they learn that he is, it is just another reason for them to believe that BzzAgent is the ultimate company that lives its personality through its actions, and the actions of every one of its employees.

To get there, they have learned how to take advantage of the single most important phenomenon to come out of the new social media era—the rise of the accidental spokesperson. To understand this evolution, Chapter 2 will start by looking at the incredible story of how one cartoon drawn on the back of a business card is helping reinvent the corporate culture at one of the largest technology companies in the world.

The Sellevator Pitch²

Being faceless doesn't work anymore. Today you need to have a company of *individuals* (instead of people) who are empowered to *share* control with your customers.

² Sell the idea of this chapter in the length of an elevator ride.