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Talktalk

## Urban Legends: Word-of-Mouth Myths, Madvocates and Champions

Debunking Myths About Brand Conversations and Word-of-Mouth in Social Media

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# Talktalk

## Urban Legends: Word-of-Mouth Myths, Madvocates and Champions Debunking Myths About Brand Conversations and Word-of-Mouth in Social Media

Now is the time to debunk some popular word-of-mouth marketing urban legends. We are, after all, in the middle of a perfect storm of factors that emphasizes the importance of customer conversations.

### Introduction

A remarkable synergy links *urban legends* and *word-of-mouth* (a term used whether the form of communication is conversation, email, social media or any other tale-teller's mechanism of choice). Urban legends are tall tales reported as truths, because they're heard from a "reliable" friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend, and they're spread by word-of-mouth. In turn, a number of urban legends about word-of-mouth marketing are being spread from the colleague-of-a-colleague-of-a-colleague.

Based upon the findings of COLLOQUY's 2011 Word-of-Mouth study, now is the time to debunk some popular word-of-mouth marketing urban legends. And this white paper seeks to spread the word.

Two and a half years ago, COLLOQUY conducted our first general consumer survey of North American households on the topic of word-of-mouth sharing practices — the results were published as the *New Champion Customers: Measuring Word-of-Mouth Activity Among Reward Program Members*. Interest in this style of marketing has accelerated exponentially since our COLLOQUY 2009 Word-of-Mouth study. We are, after all, in the middle of a perfect storm of factors that emphasizes the importance of customer conversations.

- At the time of our first study, we were on the threshold of the economic meltdown, and have since tripped over that threshold, increasing the pressure to maintain best customers and the positive buzz they can create.
- Consumers are absolutely deluged by marketing messages, and they are faced with a slew of information sources, both those they chose and those that are imposed upon them. At the same time, people continue to lose the trust they once held in government, businesses and the media. As a result, consumers increasingly rely on friends, family, neighbors, and an informal network of virtual strangers to help guide their everyday choices.
- Meanwhile, both the number and the popularity of the web 2.0 vehicles for facilitating the customer conversations we term "word-of-mouth" have almost literally exploded since our first study, providing additional platforms for vast increases in consumer dialogue — or the three-part company-to-consumer-to-consumer-network *trialogue* — in the marketplace. There's no shortage of ways with which people can now connect to each other in passing along comments and opinions: face-to-face conversations, landlines, cell phones, email, instant messaging, texting, blogs . . . and now micro blogs like Twitter, product review sites like TripAdvisor, social networking communities like Facebook, and the most-recent wunderkinds of location-based social connections, such as Foursquare.

Recognizing the impact of the Great Recession and the coincident rise in consumers' use of social media, COLLOQUY's 2011 Word-of-Mouth study sets out to better understand the shifting reality of today's word-of-mouth (frequently abbreviated as WOM): What it is, how it works, who's responsible for it, and why it matters. Fielded late in 2010, this follow-up study was designed to explore the triggers of WOM advocacy *and* negative WOM for the specific categories consumers are most involved in. In addition to the groups of active promoters (called WOM Champions) profiled in the 2009 study, the 2011 study investigates the size and influence of groups of their opposite counterparts: consumers who are ready, willing and able to spread negative stories about brands and services.

Finally, our new study also focuses on the role that the new social media plays in enabling and empowering WOM in an age of economic uncertainty.

The results of this 2011 update to our 2009 survey turn conventional wisdom upside-down. In other words, it's time to debunk some urban legends.

### Urban Legend #1: Your Word-of-Mouth Champions Are an Unshakeable Line of Defense

*The New Champion Customers* study revealed the presence of relatively large and important segments of consumers, two of which we called "Connectors" and "Advocates." Advocates aren't necessarily highly-networked, but they are likely to recommend their favorite brands when they do have conversations. Connectors are those who frequently communicate with others and sometimes include brand conversations. Advocates are more likely to promote a brand, but Connectors have a larger network of people in place.

A third group, "WOM Champions," is of paramount importance because it represents the overlap between Advocates and Connectors. WOM Champions are consumers who are highly likely to recommend their favored brands to others, and also have a comparatively large network of frequently-contacted friends and family.

This most recent study finds that of the General Population, 56% fit the definition of Advocate and 41% fit the definition of Connector—and the nexus of the two defines 33% of the General Population as WOM Champions.

#### Exhibit 1 Percentages of Advocates, Connectors and WOM Champions in the General Population

Source: 2011 COLLOQUY Word-of-Mouth Study,  
U.S. General Population Results

##### Advocates:

- *And, within the next twelve months, how likely are you to recommend the services or products of the main companies that you use in each of the following categories, to anyone you know. (top 2 boxes on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is "Not at all likely" and 10 is "Extremely likely")*

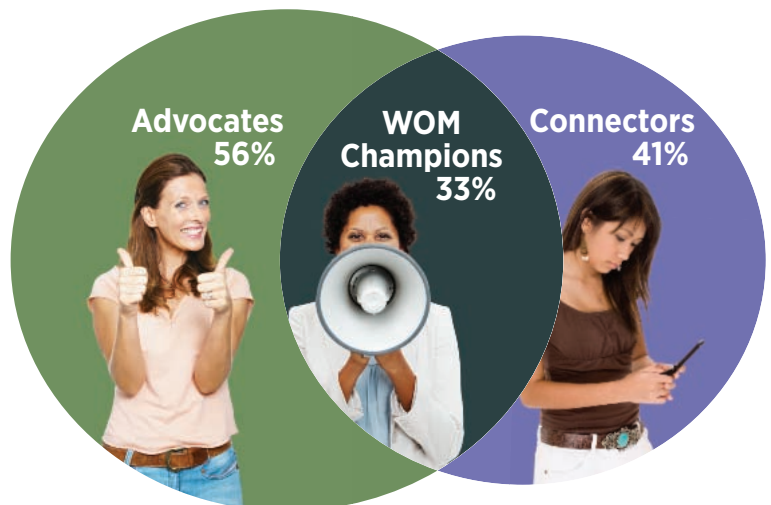
##### Connectors:

- *"I often recommend products or services to others" and "I often have conversations with others about the products or services I use". (Agree to the statements on a scale of Agree, Neutral, Disagree)*

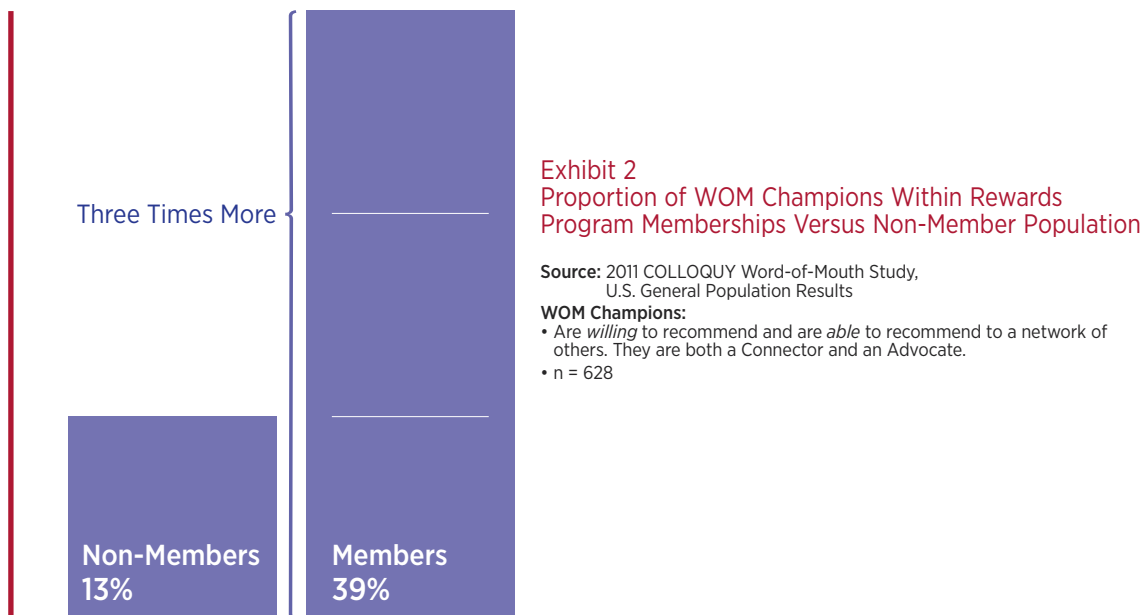
##### WOM Champions:

- *Are willing to recommend and are able to recommend to a network of others. They are both a Connector and an Advocate.*

• n = 628



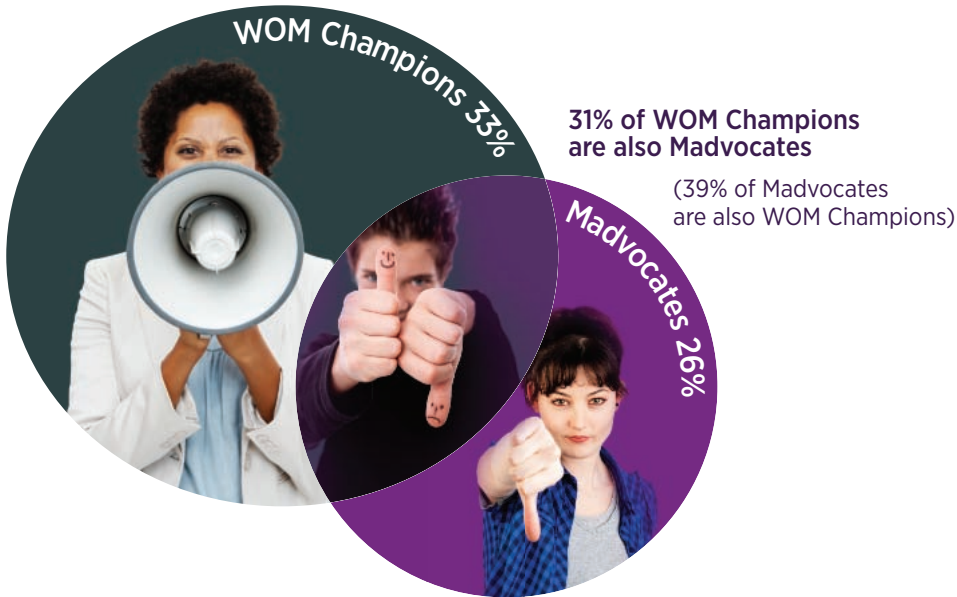
As we found in 2009, about 9 of 10 WOM Champions say that they belong to one or more loyalty programs. And the 2011 results show that while 33% of the General Population are WOM Champions, such Champions are even more common within loyalty programs, accounting for 39% of all members. And the WOM Champions within programs are active across multiple channels—when discussing or recommending products or services, WOM Champions in rewards programs use an average of 4.8 different communication methods versus only 3.5 for non-Champion members. And program members are three times more likely to be WOM Champions than are people who don't belong to any program at all, as we see in Exhibit 2.



That's the good news. But, yes, bad news travels fast . . . and, interestingly, it may be traveling fastest because of your Advocates and your WOM Champions.

The COLLOQUY 2011 Word-of-Mouth study's search for a negative WOM group turned up some surprising findings. We asked survey respondents a set of questions designed to identify a propensity for negative word-of-mouth, and found that 26% of the General Population agreed that they were inclined to advise friends and family about bad experiences with brands and that they were "far more likely to spread a bad experience as a good one." We call this group "Madvocates"—the opposite of Advocates. Well, maybe.

The study demonstrates that there isn't one group of smiling, upbeat people who share good, happy, helpful stories about companies and products in one column of a bar chart, and a separate scowling group that walks around with a hatchet in hand, ready to do ill to certain brands, in the next column. In fact, 39% of Madvocates also fit the definition of WOM Champions. And looking at it from the opposing perspective, as we see in Exhibit 3, 31% of WOM Champions are also Madvocates.



### Exhibit 3 Incidence of WOM Champions and Madvocates in the U.S. General Population

Source: 2011 COLLOQUY Word-of-Mouth Study, U.S. General Population Results

- **WOM Champions:** Are *willing* to recommend and are *able* to recommend to a network of others. They are both a Connector and an Advocate.
  - **Madvocates:** Are more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth when they have a bad experience with a product or service. Engagement in negative word-of-mouth based on questions: *"I'm far more likely to spread a bad experience than a good one"* and *"When I have a bad experience with a particular product or service, I advise my friends and family about it"* (Agree to the statement on a scale of Agree, Neutral, Disagree)
- n = 628

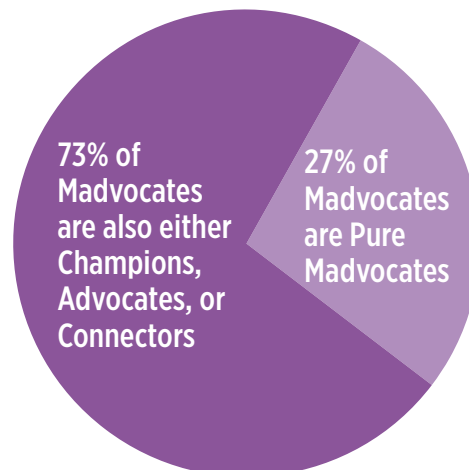
In specific terms, WOM Champions outnumber Madvocates in the General Population (33% versus 26%), but it's the crossover that's important. Clearly, a WOM Champion is like a powerful dog that guards the house and is an excellent companion – but will bite a careless owner. Treat your WOM Champions well and keep them happy and they'll speak favorably. But woe to the company that treats them poorly, because they will become Madvocates, and leverage their storytelling propensity to break instead of build.

Negative word-of-mouth is more a function of the bad product and service, experiences that all consumers have from time to time, and less a persistent attitude among a single segment of the population. "Pure Madvocates," who describe themselves as neither as connected nor willing to advocate for brands, and as oriented to negative WOM (those consumers with hatchet in hand), are rather a rare breed. Only 7% of the General Population describes themselves in these terms. And of those who fall into the Madvocate category, a significant portion can be swayed to the positive, as suggested in Exhibit 4.

### Exhibit 4 WOM Composition of U.S. Madvocates

Source: 2011 COLLOQUY Word-of-Mouth Study, U.S. General Population Results

- **Madvocates:** Are more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth when they have a bad experience with a product or service.
- **Pure Madvocates:** Those Madvocates who are *not* also WOM Champions, Advocates or Connectors.

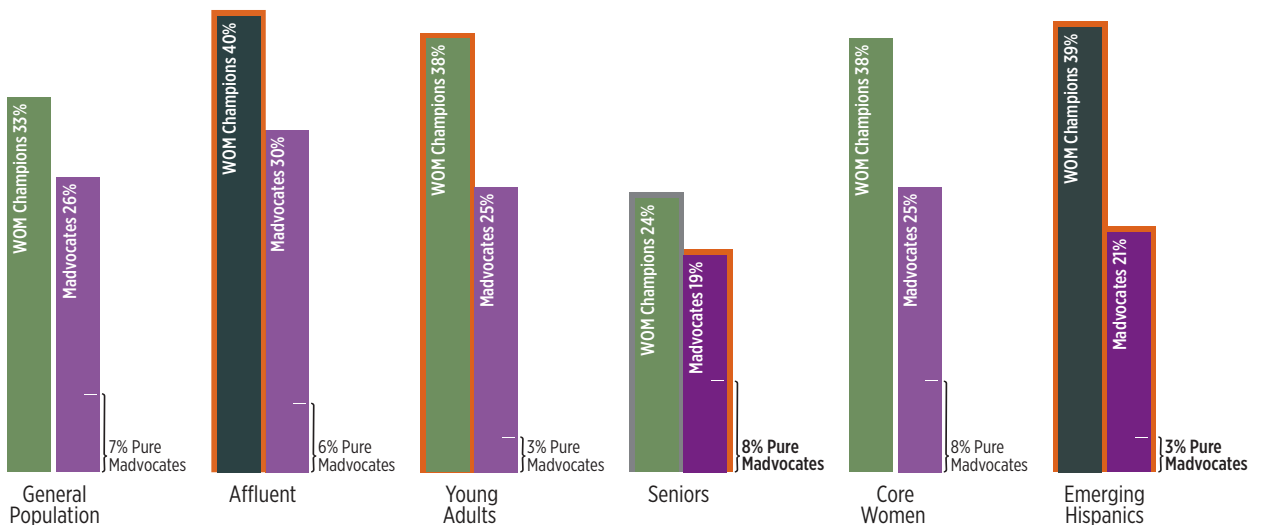


Who are the Madvocates? Potentially, pretty much everyone. The study discovered that this negative propensity is present across all demographic groups in surprisingly similar proportions, as demonstrated in Exhibit 5. But the study suggests that particular attention should be paid to those with established clout (the Affluent and Seniors) and those with growing clout (Emerging Hispanics), whose propensity for both Madvocacy and Advocacy show statistically significant differences from the General Population.

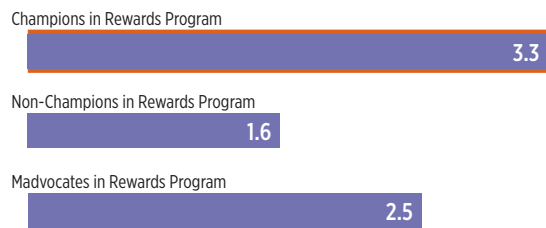
### Exhibit 5 Incidence of WOM Champions, Madvocates and Pure Madvocates Within U.S. Segments

Source: 2011 COLLOQUY Word-of-Mouth Study,  
U.S. General Population Results

- Statistically significant differences against General Population highlighted in orange
- n = 3,295



In sum, looking more closely at who talks about companies and brands raises questions about a fundamental aspect of classifying customers: Who are your best customers (and who are your worst)? On one hand, it's easy to say that a company's "best" customers are those elite or platinum buyers who spend the most with the brand, and conversely the "worst" customers would be those who spend the least. However, the Champion or Madvocate groups who are most likely to share good or bad experiences fight above their weight class. As you see in Exhibit 6, WOM Champions report having conversations about the main brand they are involved with in a category slightly more than twice as often as non-Champion members of loyalty programs, and Madvocate members engage in such brand conversations about 50% more often than non-Champion members.



### Exhibit 6 Mean Number of Discussions About Main Company in the Past 3 Months

**Source:** 2011 COLLOQUY Word-of-Mouth Study, U.S. General Population Results

- **Q:** Thinking again about the **main company** you use in that category, within the past three months, how many times have you discussed the company with others you know?
- Answers to question indicate mean number of discussions, across the categories participants are somewhat or very involved in.
- Statistically significant difference highlighted in orange
- n = 477

Yes, companies should continue to reward their biggest spenders and those who deliver the most efficient ROI, but companies should also think about identifying, satisfying and retaining the more occasional customers who may not be exceptional in terms of purchases – but who talk about their experiences to everyone who will listen.

### Urban Legend #2: Social Media Is the Supreme Accelerator of Today's Brand Conversations

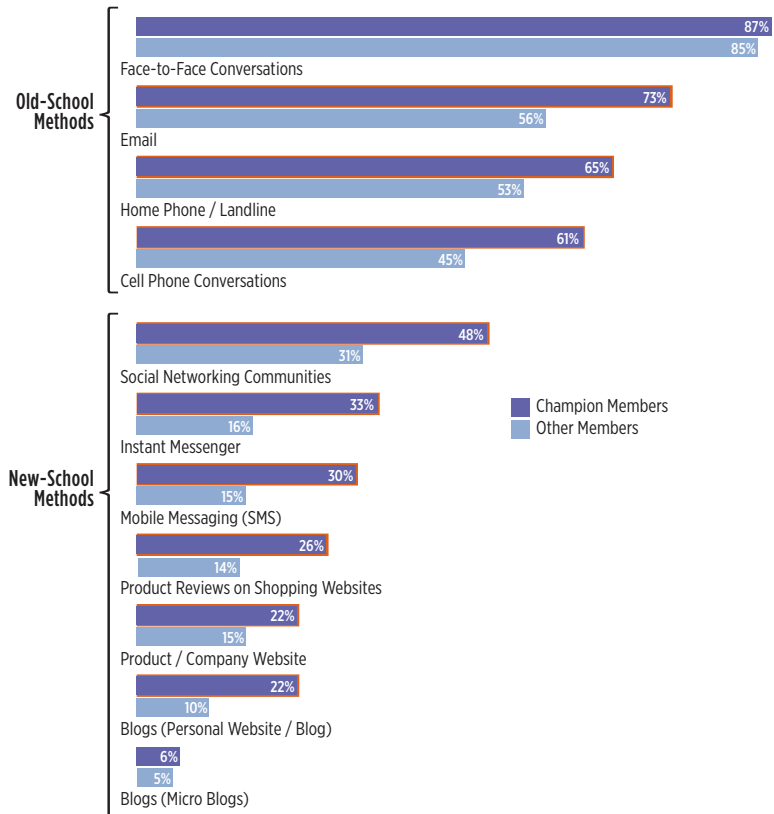
Quite simply, it isn't. Indeed, while there is, understandably, a lot of interest in technology-facilitated communication of every stripe, consumers are by no means relying only on social media to be social within the context of brand conversations.

Remarkably, at a time when Facebook counts more than half a billion users (who spend a collective 700 billion minutes each month on the site), people still talk about products and brands using traditional methods. For example, our study results show that, overall, the General Population uses "new-school" channels (which include social media) about *half* as frequently as "old-school" methods. The winning communication method for the General Population is the oldest school of all: face-to-face conversations, at 84%. Other old-school methods topped the survey results, with 58% using email, 53% using landlines, and 50% using cell phones to share brand information.

Social media use lags behind, with only 35% of the General Population sharing brand information via social networking communities, 22% via instant messaging, and 19% relying on text or mobile messaging. And despite the hype surrounding micro-blogging, only 5% of the General Population use such sites as Twitter.

Those numbers largely rise across the board for members of loyalty programs, WOM Champions within the loyalty programs in particular – yet the predominance of old-school methods remains, as you'll see in Exhibit 7. For example, face-to-face conversations are used by 87% of Champion members and 85% of other members, while at the other end of the scale only 6% of Champion members and 5% of other members use Twitter and similar platforms.

Our study results show that, overall, the General Population uses "new-school" channels (which include social media) about half as frequently as "old-school" methods.



**Exhibit 7**  
**Word-of-Mouth Communication Methods**  
**Used by Reward Program Members**

**When discussing or recommending products or services, WOM Champions in rewards programs use an average of 4.8 different communication methods**

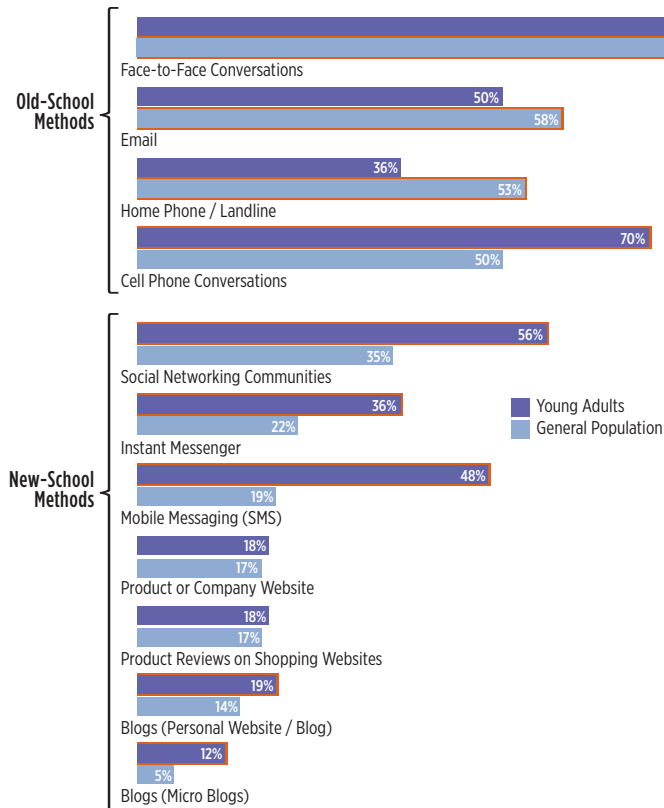
**Non-Champion members, on the other hand, use only 3.5 methods, which is significantly less**

Source: 2011 COLLOQUY Word-of-Mouth Study, U.S. General Population Results

- Q: And overall, when recommending or discussing products or services, which communication method(s) do you use? Please select all that apply.
- Statistically significant differences highlighted in orange
- n = 465

This is not to discount social media and its growing importance. For example, the 48% of WOM Champions who belong to a loyalty program and reported using social networking communities in 2011 is a significant jump over the 27% in our 2009 study.

And the quickly growing influence of Young Adults as they exhibit more buying power in future years will inspire shifts in the use of social media . . . but perhaps not as much as we might think. When we asked Young Adults, a high-adapting technology group, how they share and learn about products and services, they reported using an average of 4.5 methods, with — again — a surprising concentration on old-school communication, as depicted in Exhibit 8.



### Exhibit 8 Word-of-Mouth Communication Methods Used by Young Adults Versus the General Population

When discussing or recommending products or services, Young Adults use an average of 4.5 different communication methods

The General Population uses 3.9 different methods

Source: 2011 COLLOQUY Word-of-Mouth Study,  
U.S. General Population Results

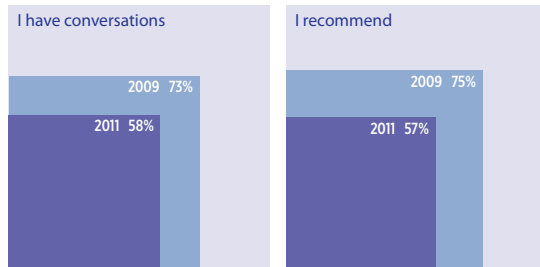
- Q: And overall, when recommending or discussing products or services, which communication method(s) do you use? Please select all that apply.
- Statistically significant differences highlighted in orange
- n = 590

That these younger consumers rely so heavily on seemingly passé 20th-Century communication channels runs counter to the image we might have of them. However, not surprisingly, this demographic was much more likely than the General Population to use cell phone conversations (70%, compared to 50% of the General Population), and in particular mobile messaging (48% of Young Adults use SMS compared to only 19% of the General Population).

### Urban Legend #3: More Word-of-Mouth Activity Means More Brand Conversation

As we stop at a traffic light or stroll through a park and see everyone around us talking or texting on a cell phone, it's tempting to believe that the level of conversations about our particular world—business and brand—is ever-increasing. Yet, COLLOQUY's 2011 Word-of-Mouth study reveals that, compared to our 2009 study, consumers are actually talking *less* about companies and their offerings. And substantially so.

In 2009, 73% of respondents said that they often had conversations with others about the products and services they used. However, two years later that number had dropped to only 58%. About the same differential — 75% versus 57% — said they often recommend products and services to others.

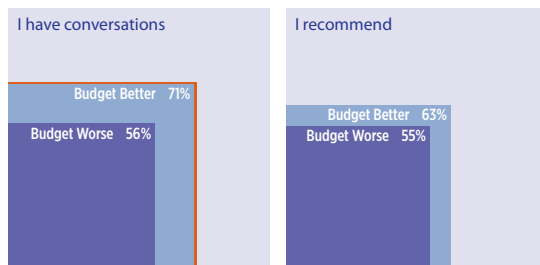


### Exhibit 9 Decline in WOM Brand Conversations

- Source:** 2011 COLLOQUY Word-of-Mouth Study, U.S. General Population Results
- **Q:** Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements (Agree, Neutral, Disagree) "I often have conversation with others about the products/services I use," and "I often recommend products/services to others."
  - 2011, n = 628
  - 2009, n = 720

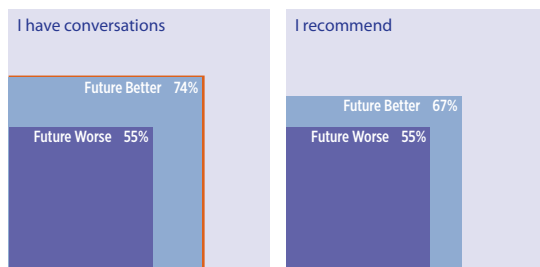
Why? Digging a bit deeper into the survey results reveals that consumers may not be talking about things they spend money on because of the economic downturn and the high rate of unemployment. Consumers on shrinking budgets don't seem to be in a mood to talk about the hottest new restaurant, the brightest plasma screen, or the best airline. Or, if they are in a mood to talk, they may be sensitive to the possibility that others in more dire straits are in no mood to listen.

Indeed, of respondents who reported that their households were doing better economically this year versus last year, 71% said they often have conversations with others about the products and services they use, and 63% make recommendations. Conversely, only 56% of those who saw themselves as worse off financially this year reported having brand conversations, and only 55% reported making recommendations.



### Exhibit 10 Impact of Household Budget on Word-of-Mouth

- Source:** 2011 COLLOQUY Word-of-Mouth Study, U.S. General Population Results
- **Q Word-of-Mouth:** Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements (Agree, Neutral, Disagree) "I often have conversation with others about the products/services I use," and "I often recommend products/services to others."
  - **Q Economic Outlook:** "Considering the state of the economy, for each statement please indicate whether the situation is better, the same, or worse than last year - The budget I have to maintain my household."
  - Statistically significant difference highlighted in orange
  - n = 628



### Exhibit 11 Impact of Family's Financial Future on Word-of-Mouth

- Source:** 2011 COLLOQUY Word-of-Mouth Study, U.S. General Population Results
- **Q Word-of-Mouth:** Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements (Agree, Neutral, Disagree) "I often have conversation with others about the products/services I use," and "I often recommend products/services to others."
  - **Q Economic Outlook:** "Considering the state of the economy, for each statement please indicate whether the situation is better, the same, or worse than last year - My family's financial future."
  - Statistically significant difference highlighted in orange
  - n = 628

As seen in Exhibits 10 and 11, the figures similarly play out from respondents as they look to the future. Those with a better economic outlook are far more likely to have conversations with others about the products and services they use. Consumers with a better financial future and

household budget are having more conversations in general about the products or services they use, yet they are no more likely than the general population or those who are worse off, to recommend the products or services they use. Overall, the economic meltdown has severely dampened the willingness of consumers to recommend the products and services they use.

So, despite more avenues to spread the word about what they do, today's word-of-mouth message might hit a bottleneck because consumers aren't having the same conversations they had in a better economy. Thus, while we might better understand word-of-mouth in today's complex environment, it is precisely that changing environment that continues to make word-of-mouth the elusive commodity it is.

### Conclusions: Walking the Talk

Companies still face considerable learning when it comes to engaging in the larger conversation of today's marketplace. Currently, companies tend to throw a bunch of tactical approaches at the proverbial wall to see what sticks. While the COLLOQUY 2011 Word-of-Mouth study doesn't reveal a magic bullet to help companies engage with consumers in both new and old communication methods, it does suggest tactics that loyalty marketers searching for truth in a growing sea of circulating urban legends can execute within their social media and word-of-mouth strategies:

- **Find the WOM Champions and treat them well.** The chances are very good that you're already in contact with them—within your rewards program. And the lesson is clear: "Hell hath no fury like a Champion scorned." Your WOM Champions are your potential Madvocates. Since Madvocacy is an attitude that nearly a third of all WOM Champions share and are willing and able to act upon, loyalty marketers should capitalize on the impact their programs can have on generating both positive and negative WOM.
- **Don't abandon the "boring" traditional.** Email is dead? Tell that (via email, maybe?) to the respondents who rely on email for their communications, as revealed by the study.
- **Concentrate on performing the fundamentals well and delivering on your brand promise.** Please the customers with excellent products and services and a rewarding experience, and they'll talk about you — in their channel of choice. Nip any service problems in the bud and head off negative WOM that can quickly go viral from these well-connected customers. Therefore, prioritize initiatives that satisfy customers over those that specifically target fueling word-of-mouth.
- **Hesitate to discard the Madvocates.** They have the energy and the inclination to tell positive stories if treated right.
- **Consider building your own channels.** For companies in high-involvement categories, we see great promise in community forums that companies sponsor and host. This might take the form of a forum for all owners of a certain model car to trade driving tips, service issues or the like; or for a frequent traveler to post advice and reviews. In addition to having one authoritative go-to place where customers talk about your brand, it also makes for a convenient terrarium in which to observe what people are saying about you. At a more advanced level, companies can correlate what is said by whom in such forums and link usernames and actual customers, thereby connecting online postings, purchase history, and service problems in the CRM database. In such forums, listen and participate, but don't try to micromanage or sell.

While the COLLOQUY 2011 Word-of-Mouth study doesn't reveal a magic bullet to help companies engage with consumers in both new and old communication methods, it suggests tactics that loyalty marketers can execute within their social media and word-of-mouth strategies.

- **Test, measure and observe.** Urban legends make for good after-hours storytelling, but not much else. Apply your core skills of data-gathering, analysis and testing as you would in any marketing initiative. Listen and participate as your customers tell the qualitative stories, but never ignore the quantitative. If your WOM Champions are trending away from recommending your product or service, that's extremely valuable to know and understand. If your Madvocates are being won over, that's equally valuable knowledge.
- **Speak kindly of COLLOQUY and our studies and white papers.** It's good karma, after all. Hey, we're just trying to promote some good WOM ourselves.

## Appendix: Methodology

This white paper is based on completed responses from 3,295 U.S. consumers nationwide. The survey was conducted in December 2010 by the polling firm Toluna. We tested the data for significant differences at a 95% confidence level. The segments which we broke out included Affluent, Young Adults, Seniors, Women, Hispanics.

For the results of a companion survey of Canadian consumers (available in mid-April 2011), visit [www.colloquy.com](http://www.colloquy.com)

### Specific sub-samples by demographics:

- Affluent: \$125K per year annual household income
- Young Adults: 18-25 years old
- Seniors: 60 years old and up
- Core Women: 25-59 years old and between \$50K and \$125K household income
- Emerging Hispanics: Hispanic-Americans with \$40K or less in household income

	Total Sample	Rewards Program Participants	Percentage
Representative, General Population	n = 628	n = 477	76%
Affluent, annual household income of \$125K or more	n = 439	n = 410	93%
Young Adults, age 18-25	n = 610	n = 425	70%
Seniors, age 60+	n = 584	n = 470	80%
Core Women, women 25-59, annual household income of \$50-125K	n = 547	n = 488	89%
Emerging Hispanics, annual household income of \$40K or less	n = 487	n = 360	74%



# Talktalk

## Urban Legends: Word-of-Mouth Myths, Madvocates and Champions Debunking Myths About Brand Conversations and Word-of-Mouth in Social Media

### The Authors



As COLLOQUY Managing Partner, **Kelly Hlavinka** has helped define and carry out COLLOQUY's mission as the voice of the loyalty industry since 1996. Drawing on her 20 years as a loyalty specialist, Kelly develops articles, white papers and educational initiatives that illuminate the many ways to unlock the asset of customer-specific data for her clients. Kelly has shared her expertise with correspondents of *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *USAToday*, *Brandweek*, *BusinessWeek*, *Advertising Age* and *SmartMoney*. A sought-after presenter, she has taught loyalty-marketing workshops and webinars around the world. Kelly in 2003 launched and managed COLLOQUY's strategic consultancy, working with clients such as Lennar Homes, MGM Mirage, Eddie Bauer, Best Buy, HP and American Express. Prior experience includes positions managing membership programs with Buyers Choice (now The Polk Co.) and the National Wildlife Federation, and she has held database-marketing positions with ACS and Equifax Consumer Direct.



As COLLOQUY Partner, **Jim Sullivan** directs the advancement of Enterprise Loyalty at COLLOQUY, an endeavor guided by his almost 30 years of managing in marketing, strategic planning, business development, innovation, and communications. Jim assists with COLLOQUY's loyalty workshops, seminars and conferences, and serves as an academic liaison for colleges, universities and other institutions researching Enterprise Loyalty. Before joining COLLOQUY, Jim founded and was a principal at Built to Lead, a leadership development practice. From 1997 to 2008, he worked at Alliance Data Inc., as Chief Marketing and Planning Officer and a member of the Executive Committee for the Retail Services division, and earlier as SVP at Information Resources Inc., consulting with such clients as Procter & Gamble, Kraft USA and ConAgra Frozen Foods. Jim serves on the Advisory Board of The Initiative for Managing Services at The Fisher College of Business, The Ohio State University, and is an MBA-level instructor in Services Marketing at OSU.

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## The Publisher



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COLLOQUY also publishes *Enterprise Loyalty in Practice*, a semi-annual executive journal that gathers practical, innovative thinking from successful Enterprise Loyalty pioneers—practitioners and researchers who are building solid strategies for organization-wide customer focus. Subscriptions are \$99 for two years; for more information, visit [www.colloquy.com/EnterpriseLoyalty](http://www.colloquy.com/EnterpriseLoyalty).

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- **LoyaltyOne Consulting** is comprised of a group of internationally-recognized practitioners who design and implement loyalty-marketing strategies for Fortune 1000 clients.
- **The AIR MILES® Reward Program** is Canada's premier coalition loyalty program. More than 10 million active Collector accounts, representing approximately two-thirds of all Canadian households, actively participate in the Program.
- **Direct Antidote** is a loyalty-marketing agency specializing in data-driven creative campaigns that transform customer behavior to deliver on short-term return on investment, while building profitable relationships for life.
- **Precima** is a consulting and analytical services firm that uses shopper insights to enable more profitable merchandising and marketing decisions. Precima's combination of loyalty, analytics and retail industry expertise has been honed over 18 years.

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