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## Watercooler chatter alive and well, with less face time, more Facebook

**SHOP TALK: Employees 'some of the best viral marketers out there'**

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Sometimes a watercooler is just a water cooler.

But watercooler conversation-that banter, chatter and gossip that dissect everything from last night's episode of "Grey's Anatomy" to the boss's latest rantings-continues unabated even though often there's no gurgling jug of agua around which co-workers can congregate. In fact, the digital revolution has made watercooler conversations easier since employees can indulge without the stigma of spending work time standing around yakking.

The e-mail, BlackBerries, instant messaging and cellphones so cherished for boosting worker productivity are also being used to recap in excruciating detail the escapades of Dr. McDreamy.

What better place for marketers to corral consumers? A survey by travel website Expedia.com showed that 63% of Americans work more than 40 hours a week. They can't be spending all that time toiling.

"It's a mistake to assume that word-of-mouth is dead in a work environment," said Ed Keller, CEO at **Keller Fay Group** and Word of Mouth Marketing Association president.

In the media and marketing community, face-to-face interaction of the real and virtual kind is very much alive and well. Just because people aren't congregating doesn't mean the workload has finally stifled watercooler conversation.

Damage control

Technology is putting a damper on the watercooler's original purpose of replenishing the

body as well as the busybody. The device has lost its dominant spot in the office, often replaced by the coffee pot or microwave. A TV monitor took the place of the watercooler recently in the Atlanta office of Turner Broadcasting's Cartoon Network.

Employees of the cable channel watched on sibling CNN the unfolding story of their guerrilla-marketing-turned-bomb-scare in Boston. "We were watching CNN and said out loud, 'Oh, what is going on in Boston?' And then we found out it was us," a Turner spokeswoman said of the ruckus about the campaign for "Aqua Teen Hunger Force." She said the mood in the office turned from idle curiosity to all-hands-on-deck panic.

Turner took responsibility for its guerrilla-marketing fiasco, and Mr. Keller pointed to its quick, apologetic response as a sign of increased responsibility for word-of-mouth, both in and out of the workplace. "Ultimately, from a marketing point of view, the goal is to help stimulate conversation about our product," he said.

Word-of-mouth banter is often encouraged in media offices as a way to stay up on the industry, particularly on the TV side. SoapNet, ABC's cable network devoted to soap operas is billed by Exec VP Deborah Blackwell as "probably the only office in America where watching soaps ... is encouraged. Staff meetings have become our 'watercoolers,' [and] we will often start them by discussing story lines that we loved or hated from the night before."

"You don't want to show your face at a SoapNet meeting if you aren't up-to-date on any soap from 'Lost' to 'General Hospital,' " Ms. Blackwell said.

The Burbank, Calif., offices have also been known to host themed days of work revolving around ABC dramas such as "Lost" or "Grey's Anatomy," the latter of which prompted a special "Grey's Day" where anyone who wore gray was entered in a raffle to win the second-season DVD.

With personal interaction still encouraged, Mr. Keller said all the supposed watercooler alternatives-e-mail, text messaging and blogs-are accessories to a still-thriving method of communication.

"They're all very much an emerging part of the way word-of-mouth takes place," he said. "What we've seen is more part of information seeking, in the same way they would read or search company websites, read appropriate blogs and look to bloggers for expert opinions. All those things are dramatically more important today than they were in the past ... but I hope people don't lose sight of all the ways people sit down with the people they know."

Dan Buczaczer, word-of-mouth expert and senior VP at Publicis Groupe's Denuo, agrees with Mr. Keller that most word-of-mouth still occurs on a literal face-to-face basis. But Mr. Buczaczer added: "Word-of-mouth can spread around [the office] more quickly via a mass e-mail than it used to. ... I wouldn't discount face-to-face, but [digital media represent] a new, powerful force because one message can reach 30 people at once

instead of two people talking in the break room."

## Employee power

That may be good news for the network exec hoping to spread the word about a TV show, but it can also be bad news for an employer trying to control the spigot of watercooler conversation.

"We keep talking about the power being with the consumer but the power is now also with the employee," Mr. Buczaczer said. "If management is slow to get out news about something, it will find another way to get out. Management may not know it, but the word is getting out."

A recollection from one agency executive is no doubt a common one these days: "Management took its time around here announcing the departure of someone because they wanted to manage the timing. Meanwhile, the person changed his Facebook profile from 'I'm working here' to 'I'm working there,' and it got out before management could control it."

Social-networking pages may be the new watercoolers. Instead of beginning Monday with a watercooler recap of the weekend's high points, employees can update their web pages with stories and photos of what they did, Mr. Buczaczer said, adding, "People on the web are willing to show more of their personal life, and that extends to the business world."

No face-to-face contact, no looks of embarrassment.

In WOM-speak, Mr. Buczaczer talks about "organic social spaces." The office is such a space.

"Definitely," he said. "Management likes to think it's not, but they're kind of old-media [in their mind-sets], and employees are new-media. ... Employees are some of the best viral marketers out there."

But all is not bad news for the boss. Technology in the workplace accelerates both watercooler activity and paid activity.

"They can update their MySpace page in five or 10 minutes and get a huge amount of information out quickly," Mr. Buczaczer said of his colleagues. "People can check their personal e-mail and update their social networking page, but they can still find ways to be more productive [at their work] than ever before."