



Improving Army Recruitment by Word-of-Mouth Marketing

By Capt. Kevin Sandell, U.S. Army Public Affairs Officer

When the Secretary of the Army mentioned during a recent Association of the United States Army forum that the Army is not doing enough to connect with the American public, he wasn't surprising anyone. In fact, Secretary Fanning elaborated, saying, "...that divide doesn't bode well for future recruiting efforts and getting the resources the Army needs from Capitol Hill."¹

Unlike its sister services, the Army cannot rely on technology or equipment to sell its capabilities to its stakeholders. People are what make the Army, and it is their triumphs in combat and garrison, that ultimately tell the Army Story. All soldiers, DA Civilians, Army Families and retirees have a role to play as ambassadors of our Army. To harness the power of "Soldier spokespersons" across the Total Army, the service should harness the power of Word-of-Mouth Marketing.

We, as representatives of the world's greatest fighting force, can shape the national conversations about the Army simply by emphasizing our role to those in our closest networks.

The statistics on Word-of-Mouth marketing are compelling. According to Nielsen, 92 percent of consumers believe recommendations from friends and family over all forms of advertising.² Over 70 percent of consumers identify word-of-mouth as a key influencer in their purchasing decision.³ On social media, 58 percent of consumers share their positive experiences with a company, and ask family, colleagues, and friends for their opinions about brands.⁴

What do the statistics mean, however, for Army recruitment efforts? The prevailing thought presumably is in collecting versus connecting. Army recruitment tactics focus on amassing broad numbers to meet fiscal year missions, versus actually connecting with potential recruits through personal stories from currently-serving soldiers and veterans.

As written in *Forbes*, "Having 100 really passionate fans that love your brand or product is exponentially more effective than having 10,000 'fans' who signed up just to win a free iPad from you. Just like in life—if you have to buy your friends, are they really your friends?"⁵

The analogy can be likened to recent Army marketing movements like the Hometown Recruiter program or the 'Meet Your Army' campaign.⁶ A soldier offering firsthand experience to an audience of personal networks influences more than a recruiter "cold-calling" random high school students in the school cafeteria. The conflict arises though, when a potential recruit is reluctant to military service.

In research conducted by the Harvard Institute of Politics after the terrorist attacks in Paris, 60 percent of millennials (adults between 18-29 years old) support the Army's use in combating the Islamic State. Yet, when asked if they would serve in the military, only 15 percent were willing to do so.⁷

A tangible method to reaching that very demographic could come through Word-of-Mouth Marketing. Soldiers describing their passion for their job, their opportunities and how military service has benefited them, could work towards recruiting the Millennial Generation.

"What attracts even the millennials to military service are still largely the same reasons that attracted Generation X and the Baby Boomers to military service." Stephanie Miller, the Pentagon's director of accessions policy, said. "It is things like education, the opportunity to travel, the opportunity to be part of a team, and meaningful



work. It is those attractive points that are still relevant today as they were 50 years ago.”⁸

The Army should embrace five solutions that would benefit the service, and greatly impact Army recruiting efforts. All of them would be under the umbrella of the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, U.S. Army Recruiting Command or the Army Marketing and Research Group.

The first solution: Incentivizing current soldiers or veterans to speak via social media about their positive experiences in the Army. U.S. Army Recruiting Command should encourage soldiers to produce short online videos that engage friend networks and create dialogue and shared understanding of the military. A unit’s command group could easily approve videos produced by its soldiers, and then clear for publishing on personal or the Army’s social media sites. Other options could include soldier testimonial advertisements in news websites and paid advertisements in online games and apps. The Command should also reinstate referral bonuses for assisting others to join the Army. While the “Army Referral System- Sergeant Major of the Army Recruiting Team” program is a good start, there are no bonuses currently offered with referrals.⁹

Secondly, the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs should provide those soldiers who participate with full access to the Enterprise Army Brand Portal. In doing so, soldiers can create their own marketing products while still aligning with the Army Brand and Army Regulation 601-208, The Army Brand and Marketing Program.¹⁰ Soldiers’ ingenuity and product ownership would be showcased through this proposal.

A third solution: Assignments at the Army Marketing and Research Group would be Key-Developmental, and branch immaterial. The majority of officers assigned to AMRG are Army Public Affairs Officers; however, combat arms officers would provide unique insights into targeting recruits. Soldiers from all walks and MOSs would benefit the organization and themselves by developing ideas for marketing the Army and better describing their specialty or branch to key audiences.

The fourth solution comes by better internal marketing of the Army Marketing and Communication Proposal System to Soldiers and units. This website is hidden among the pages of the Recruiting Command’s resources page, and many Soldiers are unaware of it.¹¹ If USAREC was really serious about a Total Army effort in recruitment, it should increase command awareness of the system’s importance.

Finally, “America’s Army: Proving Grounds” – the official computer game of the U.S. Army, which was released in August 2013, had more than 920,000 player accounts created during the beta period and over 7.7 million hours of play.¹² The game programmers should include video segments interspersed throughout the game of combat arms soldiers reciting their experiences in combat, especially those who’ve earned valorous awards. Gamers could earn points for viewing the video segments or conversing with other players. The exposure to a million players through simple Word-of-Mouth videos would pay dividends.

To continue being the world’s greatest fighting force, the Army must develop innovative ways to approach recruitment marketing. Word-of-Mouth Marketing is a proven tactic to shape the conversation about branding, and the Army would benefit by letting soldiers tell the Army Story.

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NOTES:

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