

'INFLUENTIALS' AUTHOR LOOKS TO MEASURE WORD OF MOUTH

Will Conduct Daily Surveys on How Conversations Shape Buying Behavior

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By [Matthew Creamer](#)

New York (AdAge.com) -- Measuring how bloggers, chat-room denizens, message-board scribes and other digital-based influencers are affecting your brand is easy enough. But getting a read on conversations that happen in the offline world -- which comprises at least 80% of word of mouth, according to some thinking -- has been a much more vexing problem for the nascent discipline of word-of-mouth marketing.

Ed Keller, who made a marketing splash three years ago with the book "The Influentials," is taking a crack at it.

The former CEO of research firm Roper ASW is launching a company he hopes will shed light on how everyday in-person interactions -- say, water-cooler chatter, an in-store recommendation or a tip from Uncle Joe -- shape buying behavior. The Keller Fay Group's signature product is TalkTrack, a service that asks 100 Americans each day about the conversations they have about brands, media and purchasing decisions.

The mission

"The concept of measuring the totality of word of mouth, both offline and online, seems to be a major missing piece of the puzzle," Mr. Keller said in an interview. "That's our mission."

Its first client is StarcomMediavest Group, the Publicis Groupe-owned media agency whose clients include Procter & Gamble Co. and Coca-Cola Co. But Mr. Keller also plans to sell TalkTrack, as well as consulting services on word-of-mouth messages and delivery, directly to marketers.

"We've long known the power of word of mouth and how it works better for some categories than others, but we've never known more than that," said Jim Kite, exec VP-director of research, insight and accountability for MediaVest. "I don't think we'll be tracking word of mouth like the overnights, but I think as we build up a rich database we'll get learnings from various categories."

SMG will begin getting data in February when TalkTrack is launched, Mr. Kite said.

While word of mouth is often assumed to be more closely linked to PR, Starcom will use it to understand how effective advertising is in spreading the word about brands.

"How can we use word of mouth to amplify what we do on TV, print, out of home, digital or whatever?" asked Mr. Kite. "If we know what messages are getting picked up, then we'll know how we should be using our other media more smartly because we can see what momentum we're getting on the back of it."

Growing interest

Each day TalkTrack will conduct e-mail interviews with a different set of 100 Americans ages 13 and older. The subjects will be asked about conversations they've had about brands and products as well as what actions those conversations inspired. They won't, however, be asked specifically about brands like Coke or Pampers. "Brand mentions will come out spontaneously," Mr. Keller said. "As a memory jog, we'll ask about categories, like food and beverage."

Mr. Keller is teaming with former Roper NOP World Managing Director Brad Fay in the venture. Mr. Keller's 2003 book, written with Jon Berry, burned the concept of influentials -- ordinary Joes who have a disproportionate amount of influence on others' decisions -- in the marketing collective consciousness, especially among PR people.

Interest in word of mouth has been spreading rapidly among agencies of all stripes, as well as marketers. A key indicator of that is the growth of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, which this week is holding a conference dedicated in part to looking at word of mouth has moved to a more central position in the marketing mix.