



How to use influencers to drive a word-of-mouth strategy

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Definition

We define influencers, as *everyday consumers who are substantially more likely than the average to seek out information and to share ideas, information, and recommendations with other people*. They do this both through volunteering their opinions about products and services that they feel passionate about, and by being turned to for their knowledge, advice, and insights. We call these influencers Conversation Catalysts.

Where to start?

In 2000, Malcolm Gladwell popularized the idea of influencers with the publication of *The Tipping Point*, which introduced the marketing community to "The Law of the Few," comprised of Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen. "The success of any kind of social epidemic," Gladwell argued, "is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts."

More recently, in this age of Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, some marketers have begun to focus their influencer efforts on celebrities—people like Kim Kardashian and her tens of millions of followers or fans on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook—whom they believe can influence people through their endorsements, especially via social media.

But research by our firm, and confirmed by academic research, proves that every-day people have significant value to marketers. They should be central to any influencer marketing program because of the strength of their relationships among the people they influence, and because all consumers regardless of age, socio-economic status, or other key demographics, all know such people and are influenced by their recommendations. And because they are important to consumers, they should be important to marketers as well.

In an attempt to estimate the impact of word of mouth academics like Barak Libai, Eitan Muller, and Renana Peres, estimated the social value of an influencer at potentially *double* that of average customers, when they remove that influencer from a simulated community of consumers. In research conducted by our firm with Dr. Libai, for a media company, their value has

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been shown to be *four* times greater.

Keller Fay research has found clear and consistent evidence that Conversation Catalysts have a far greater-than-average involvement in word of mouth. Compared to the average American, for example, they are 90% more likely to engage in brand-specific word of mouth. Conversation Catalysts are responsible for over 400 million word of mouth brand impressions every day in the U.S. That amounts to one-fourth of the 1.6 billion word of mouth brand impressions created every day in the U.S. – a level more than two and a half times their representation in the population.

Essentials

In June 2006, Keller Fay launched a continuous study of consumers' word of mouth conversations in the U.S, called TalkTrack. A similar study launched in the United Kingdom in 2011. We have conducted ad hoc studies on a one-time basis in many other countries including Mexico, Russia, Brazil, Colombia, Australia, China, Korea, and Japan. With a decade of research under our belt, there are some distinct and consistent findings about influencers.

1. Focus on offline conversations

With the growth of digital marketing, it is not surprising that when marketers think of word of mouth, many think of the internet first and foremost. And there is no question or debate that digital plays a growing role in the lives of consumers. But when it comes to conversation – the back and forth of ideas and information between consumers – offline channels dominate both in volume and impact. In fact, two-thirds of the sales impact of conversation comes from offline discussions about brands, rather than through social media, according to a 2014 Word of Mouth Marketing Association study by Analytic Partners.

Marketers should take advantage of digital marketing tools. But they should not stop there, and in many cases should not even start there. The initiatives they create to spur word of mouth should also consider those that can break into the offline world – in people's homes, at coffee bars, at the office, at parties, in stores, and the other places people go throughout the day, as these are the locations where most word of mouth conversations occur.

2. Start with a people-centric strategy, not channel-centric

While offline may be the dominant mode of communications today, influencers are avid users of social media too. You might call them channel agnostic—they will use whatever channel is most convenient or appropriate for a particular type of sharing and advice giving. It underscores the importance of starting with a people-centric strategy rather than a channel strategy when seeking to tap the power of influencers.

Influencers are engaged in more than double the number of brand conversations as other consumers, both online and offline. Conversation Catalysts are much more apt than the average to talk about brands on Facebook (+21%), YouTube (+32%), Pinterest (+77%), Twitter (+69%), and Instagram (+90%). They are 30% more likely than the average to talk about things they have seen on social media when talking about brands.

3. Aim for positive contributions

When marketers think of word of mouth, they often focus on negative word of mouth – the complaints and criticisms that consumers have with their products. To many, fear of the negative is an impediment to their willingness to engage openly in conversation with consumers.

But the vast majority of Conversation Catalysts' word of mouth conversations are in fact, positive. Positive sentiment outweighs negative by a margin of more than 8 to 1. Further, the positive word of mouth carries with it more credibility. Companies should go into word of mouth thinking positively – both in terms of what awaits them when they tap into the conversation, as well as what they can bring to the conversation.

4. Make it easy for influencers to engage with your brand

Influencers have one characteristic that is particularly helpful to marketers: They are hand-raisers. They are the consumers who, disproportionately, call customer service-numbers, visit brand websites, or volunteer for marketing programs. They like to engage with brands, and they are looking to share what they find.

For this reason, marketers should make a priority of effectively responding to incoming inquiries, and building databases of these types of consumers. They should also use their websites as a hub for content to be shared.

5. Word of mouth can complement paid advertising

The power of advertising should not be ignored when considering word of mouth strategies. About one in four word of mouth conversations about brands in the U.S. involve a reference to advertising. For influencers, the role of advertising in generating word of mouth is even greater.

In fact, the “Return on WOM” study by the Word of Mouth Marketing Association in 2014 found that one-third of the sales impact of word of mouth is due to word of mouth working as an amplifier to paid advertising. This is consistent with research from 6 decades ago when Columbia professors Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz found that advertising is ineffective at directly changing consumer preferences. Rather, they said, advertising is effective because it prompts conversations between “opinion leaders” and other people who are then persuaded to purchase. This was one of the earliest findings of the power of influencers.

There are also new tools available for buying access to influencers through digital marketing platforms. Increasingly, it's possible to execute a media plan targeted to influencers.

6. Engage influencers in a meaningful two-way dialogue

A big part of connecting with influencers is having the right message. They tend to be highly educated and informed. Above all, influencers like to be “in the know.” To engage influencers, give them information before it's available to others so they can be the ones to share it. Give them content that's easy to talk about or share. Ask for their opinions, and engage them in a meaningful two-way dialogue. Acknowledge their expertise and knowledge, and they'll be more open to what you have to say and offer.

A remarkable number of agencies and media organizations specialize in reaching influencers on behalf of their brand clients. Each is, in effect, a case study in how to frequently and effectively undertake influencer marketing. The variety of approaches is part of what makes the field fascinating.

- **BzzAgent** was one of the first companies to enter this space, more than a decade ago. Owned by the retail industry giant Dunhumby, they give product samples to thousands of influencers who have signed up to try and recommend products they like. Their clients include Cadbury, Coca-Cola, Danone, and P&G. BzzAgent did not screen people in or out based

on their influencer characteristics; everyone was welcome to join their network. When we interviewed their participating consumers several years ago, however, we found they were about six times more likely than average to be influencers, or Conversation Catalysts. The opportunity to be among the first to try new products and share their experiences with friends was a natural magnet for influencers.

- **Experticity** is another influencer marketing platform company that has built a community of “experts” in verticals like outdoor recreation, sports apparel, and health/nutrition. Many of their influencers work in these industries as retail employees, but others are category passionates. In a study we conducted for the firm, we found that they recommend products 22 times more often than the average person, and that their advice is highly credible and acted upon.
- **The Guardian News and Media** presents itself as a medium reaching an audience rich with influencers in the United Kingdom. Keller Fay research found that the mobile audience for the Guardian has anywhere from 50% to 100% more conversations about brands than the average British person.
- **News UK** seeks to demonstrate the influence and reach of its entire audience, and our research confirms that their readers are 25% more likely to be Conversation Catalysts compared to the average, they have 20% more brand conversations, and are 25% more likely to talk about ads they have seen. The News UK digital audience is even more influential than the print audience.
- **Pursway** is a marketing technology company that matches clients’ customer lists to a larger database that contains the closest 5-15 friends for each customer. Working for companies like Sony, Orange, and Comcast, they are able to identify actual social networks, and influencers within those networks, in order to improve marketing ROI by a claimed 30-50%.
- **TapInfluence** is an influencer platform that provides sponsored content to bloggers and other online influencers. In a 2016 study with Nielsen Catalina, they have been able to demonstrate an 11x return on investment based on consumer exposure to messages from online influencers.

This is not a comprehensive list of approaches and providers in the influencer marketing space. To learn about more of them, a good place to start is the membership list of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (Womma.org).

Reminder checklist

There are several important things for marketers to contemplate when considering an influencer strategy:

- What are your objectives? There are many ways to embark on an influencer campaign, and which approach you choose will depend on your business objectives.
- What types of influencer are relevant? The focus of this article has been “every day” influencers, or the influencer “next door.” But it’s also possible to focus on experts (doctors, financial professionals), or decision makers (elected officials, CEOs) or celebrities of all kinds, especially those with large numbers of followers on social media.
- What channels are you going to use? Influence happens both online and offline. It can be initiated with sampling programs, social media campaigns, print or TV ad campaigns, sharing new and “insider” information with influencers about your brand or your category, etc.
- What’s your message? Think about what message you want your influencers to impart on their social circles. And make sure it’s something that is easy to share and worth spreading.

Case Studies

Weight Watchers worked with the influencer platform Crowdtap to amplify its marketing messages in order to recruit more people to their weight loss programs. They found that 22% of the buzz generated about their Simple Start program came from just 25 influencers, reflecting the power of influencers to drive messages online.

[Mizuno Running: The Mezamashii Run](#)

Mizuno, a Japanese running shoe company, wanted to generate trial among the running community in the US, and ultimately, increase sales. Mizuno's trial experience was reinvented to allow potential customers to try wearing the shoes by running in them. The campaign ran in three phases, starting with the targeting of bloggers and other influencers with sample shoes, expanding with online ads, and continued with partnerships that kept people engaged. The campaign achieved strong online engagement and interaction, and led to the brand's most successful sales year. Ultimately, people were the media through the power of word-of-mouth.

[Kraft Foods: Canada Samplicious](#)

Kraft Brands in Canada uses a "Samplicious" sampling program, aimed at influencers, to get the word out about their brands. Influencers are selected based on their "talkability" factor, or higher-than-average talking and recommending products. They were able to sell 15,000 samples to influencers in just four days, which led to 274,000 product trials and sales lifts of 30% to 325% over two months.

[Dettol: Messages interrupt, utility delights](#)

Dettol, an antiseptic liquid brand in China owned by Reckitt Benckiser, used an influencer campaign that involved organizing an "army of moms" who volunteered to try and advocate the brand in smaller cities across China where brand penetration was low. The campaign achieved a TV-like reach of 46%, grew trial by over five times, doubled purchase intent, and delivered more than an 80% increase in sales – all this at one-sixth of the cost of traditional media.

Conclusions

As marketers move away from mass market approaches based on broad demographics, and take advantage of new tools and technologies that enable them to target consumers, influencer marketing holds a significant appeal. It is becoming conventional wisdom in some quarters that social media is the best way to activate influencers on a large-scale basis. This, however, is a myth.

The strongest influencers in people's lives, the ones that have the most sway over what they buy, are people they know personally, trust, and seek out for advice and recommendations. Sometimes they rely on what they see on social media, and often they rely on what they hear about and talk about in real life. Among those real world friends, there are some who sit near the center of a complex social system, and due to their positions and personalities, they play a bigger role than average in how people choose to live their real-world lives. These are valuable people, both to their friends and to the marketers of brands. These are the true influencers in today's marketplace.

Further reading

Warc Topic Page: [PR, WOM & Earned Media](#)

Warc Topic Page: [Influencers](#)

Warc case studies: [Targeting Influencers](#)

Warc case studies: [Word of mouth and advocacy led campaigns](#)

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About the authors

Ed Keller is the CEO of the Keller Fay Group, a market research firm that specializes in word of mouth marketing, and President of Engagement Labs. He is the co-author of *The Influentials: One American in Ten Tells the Other Nine How to Vote, Where to Eat, and What to Buy* (Free Press: 2003) and *The Face-to-Face Book: Why Real Relationships Rule in a Digital Marketplace* (Free Press: 2012). Keller is past President of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA), and past president of the Market Research Council.

Brad Fay is the Chief Operating Officer of the Keller Fay Group and Chief Research Officer of Engagement Labs. He is the co-author of *The Face-to-Face Book: Why Real Relationships Rule in a Digital Marketplace* (Free Press: 2012). He is the past chairman of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, and a past President of the Market Research Council. In 2007, Brad won the Grand Innovation Award of the Advertising Research Foundation for the development of Keller Fay's TalkTrack®, the first continuous measurement system for all word of mouth, including the 90% of WOM which occurs offline.

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