

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Understanding Influence, and Making It Work For You: A CNET Networks Study

The recent surge in social networking has opened up new opportunities for word-of-mouth marketing. Influence is a very hot topic, and a widely disputed one, generating a variety of popular theories and an assortment of best-selling books. Conventional wisdom holds that influence is not universal, but is the domain of a few highly-connected individuals with a deep but narrow expertise who act as advisors to the rest of the population. This notion has greatly influenced the way marketing and media programs are designed and implemented. The most widely accepted model places the influencers at the top and the majority of the public down below; marketers have traditionally focused their attention on the top tier, with the rest of the population getting broad, low-fidelity messages. But is this approach correct?

Because this question can have far-reaching implications for marketers and media companies alike, CNET Networks™ conducted a comprehensive study exploring the nature of influence and testing the validity of common marketing models. Through surveys and observation, the research explored the preferences and behaviors of CNET Networks users as well as users of competing portals. The study examined:

- the size, makeup and distribution of social networks
- what motivates people to pass along information
- the range and number of topics users are interested in
- the types of information that influencers find valuable
- where influencers find their information

The research led to some surprising insights that directly challenge conventional notions of influence. The study revealed that social networks are normally distributed, with moderately-sized networks being far more typical than previously assumed. The study also helped to demystify the motivations behind influence, revealing basic, common-sense reasons why people like to give advice. These findings suggest that the two-tier marketing model, though popular, is flawed: by focusing on the highly-connected few, marketers fail to take advantage of the enormous potential in most consumers.

The white paper explains these findings in detail, and offers clues about how influence can be activated and where influential consumers can be found. The complete paper may be requested at www.cnetnetworks.com/researchinsight.