

4.7: External Influences on Consumers

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this section, students should be able to do the following:

1. Discuss opinion leaders and their impact on the marketing and advertising process.
2. Categorize the various group identifications (e.g., reference groups, subcultures, taste cultures, and brand communities).

As social creatures, human beings like to “fit in” and belong to groups. These group memberships help us define our identity. Both individuals and groups influence our attitudes toward products in profound ways.

Opinion Leaders

Most of us eagerly solicit others’ opinions about brands, but we don’t pay attention to just anyone. An **opinion leader** is a person who is frequently able to influence others’ attitudes or behaviors. Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1983). Advertisers like to reach opinion leaders when they can, so they can enlist these individuals to help them spread the word on their behalf. For example, the BzzAgent word-of-mouth network identifies people who like to talk to others about products. The company recruits BzzAgents at its Web site (<http://www.bzzagent.com>), where it invites prospective agents to be “part of a growing international network of over 425,000 consumers” who share their honest opinions about its clients’ products with people they know.



Figure 4.10 BzzAgents

In addition, opinion leaders also are likely to be **opinion seekers**. They are generally more involved in a product category and actively search for information. As a result, they are more likely to talk about products with others and to solicit others’ opinions as well. Contrary to an outmoded, static view of opinion leadership, most product-related conversation does not take place in a “lecture” format in which one person does all of the talking. A lot of product-related conversation occurs in the context of a casual interaction rather than as formal instruction.

The Market Maven

Opinion leaders tend to “specialize” in a category (e.g., fashion or electronics), while a **market maven** likes to transmit marketplace information of all types. These shopaholics simply like to stay on top of what’s happening in the marketplace. They are likely to strongly agree with statements like “I like helping people by providing them with information about many kinds of

products” and “My friends think of me as a good source of information when it comes to new products or sales.” Anyone you know?

The Surrogate Consumer

Unlike an informal opinion leader, a **surrogate consumer** is a person whom we hire to provide input into our purchase decisions. These include interior decorators, stockbrokers, professional shoppers, and even college consultants who help prospective students identify schools that will be the best match for them. Surrogates can exert a huge influence on consumers’ decisions. Advertisers tend to overlook surrogates when they try to convince consumers to buy their goods or services. This can be a big mistake: they may mis-target their communications to end consumers instead of to the surrogates who actually sift through product information and decide among product alternatives. For example, in many cases (particularly for more affluent people) it’s an interior designer who makes a lot of decisions about the furnishings a client will put into a room; the client just writes the check.

Group Identification

Reference Groups

A **reference group** is “an actual or imaginary individual or group conceived of as having significant relevance upon an individual’s evaluations, aspirations or behavior.” Reference groups are important because they determine to whom we’ll listen (for example, we’re more likely to heed the advice of friends than strangers). Advertising messages that come from members of our reference group will have more influence over us, because we want to fit in and conform to that group.

Why are reference groups so persuasive? The answer lies in the potential power they wield over us. **Social power** is “the capacity to alter the actions of others.” To the degree to which you are able to make someone else do something, regardless of whether they do it willingly, you have power over that person. The experts and beautiful people we discussed earlier tend to possess social power over the rest of us, but for different reasons.

Subcultures

A **subculture** is a group of people whose members share common beliefs and common experiences. A subculture may be based on religion, age, ethnic background, race, and even on the place where we live. Silicon Valley subculture contrasts with that of the Deep South or Boston’s Back Bay, for example. We’ll get into some of these groups in more detail when we discuss market segmentation.

Taste Cultures

In contrast to larger, demographically based subcultures (which nature usually determines), people who are part of a **taste culture** freely choose to identify with a lifestyle or aesthetic preference. For example, vegans avoid using or consuming animal products; they choose to avoid eating meat or eggs; wearing fur, leather, wool, or down; and using cosmetics or chemical products tested on animals. These are overt expressions of a lifestyle philosophy (cruelty-free), but adherents also respond to messages that are consistent with their needs. For example, at <http://www.mooshoes.com>, you can buy vegan shoes that feature faux leather lining and a faux suede exterior.

Brand Communities

A **brand community** is a group of consumers who share a set of social relationships based upon usage or interest in a product. At the Web site <http://www.jonessoda.com>, community members submit their own label photos, and they view and rate the forty-three thousand photos other members have submitted. Unlike other kinds of communities, these members typically don’t live near each other—except when they may meet for brief periods at organized events or **brandfests** that community-oriented companies such as Jeep, Saturn, or Harley-Davidson sponsor. These events help owners to “bond” with fellow enthusiasts and strengthen their identification with the product as well as with others they meet who share their passion.

A **consumer tribe** is a similar concept; this term refers to a group of people who identify with one another because of a shared allegiance to an activity or a product. Although these tribes are often unstable and short-lived, at least for a time members identify with others through shared emotions, moral beliefs, styles of life, and of course the products they jointly consume as part of their tribal affiliation. Pontiac opened a community hub on Yahoo! it calls Pontiac Underground, “Where Passion for Pontiac Is Driven by You”). The carmaker does no overt marketing on the site; the idea is to let drivers find it and spread the word themselves. Users

share photos and videos of cars using Flickr and Yahoo! Video. A Yahoo! Answers Zone enables knowledge sharing. Meanwhile, a list of Pontiac clubs in the physical world and on Yahoo! Groups allows users to connect offline and online.

For many years BMW's advertising has emphasized its sophisticated engineering as it appealed to affluent car enthusiasts. Lately, however, the company is broadening its message to be one of innovation and independence, as it hopes to entice drivers who are more captivated by the style of a car's interior than the engine that sits under the hood. In one ad, the company highlights the design for a glass-walled new factory in Leipzig rather than a car model. Its strategy is to appeal to what it calls "the idea class": self-motivated architects, professionals, and entrepreneurs who value authenticity and independent thinking. They buy luxury cars, but they're not car nuts.

Why the change? An internal study found that of the 1.9 million consumers who bought luxury cars in a recent year, 1.4 million didn't even consider BMW. About six hundred thousand of those non-BMW purchasers said they were looking for a car that's fun to drive. A BMW marketing executive noted that for the company, "that is low-hanging fruit." Still, many of those buyers instead drove home a Saab, Infiniti, Acura, or Lexus. The new ads were created by GSD&M/Idea City, BMW's ad agency, to convince these people that the values of innovation and independent thinking run deep in the company's corporate culture (presumably in contrast to larger automakers that aren't as free to innovate). As this executive observed, "It should appeal to the idea class that we are independent, that we are free to do something."

Key Takaway

Each of us belongs to many groups—some by birth and some by choice. To a greater or lesser extent these group memberships influence our consumption choices and the types of advertising messages that appeal to us. A product's (perceived) connection to a group we find desirable often is a key theme in advertising.

EXERCISES

1. Explain the role opinion leaders and market mavens play in shaping communications about new products.
2. List and describe each of the various group identification forms discussed in this section of the chapter. Provide a brief example of each of the forms you have listed.

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