

Influence: Exploring Perspective in Private Customer Communities

Introduction

A growing number of marketing efforts are focusing on tapping Influentials: identifying, recruiting, informing, and winning the loyalty of highly connected individuals in the hopes that they will in turn use their powers of persuasion on their broader social networks. However, a debate is brewing about how this influence process really works – and what types of individuals can truly impact the behavior of others. Current communications theories suggest that levels of relationship, or closeness (as opposed to simply the attributes of the individual influencer), may play a more important role in the process of personal influence than previously thought.¹

This study explores the act of personal influence through data retrieved from 10 private customer communities, facilitated by Communispace Corporation. Private, long-term communities are a unique environment for studying the behavior of personal influence: members get to know one another, often reveal candid information about themselves, and freely seek and offer advice. This creates an intimate environment where members often form close online relationships.

Throughout the history of the study of influence most researchers have relied on self-reported methods of data gathering (the source perspective – “I influenced X number of people today”). This study uses this method as well, but also incorporates a somewhat new approach – the perspective of the person being influenced (the recipient perspective – “I was influenced by this person”). Through the recipient perspective, we found that influence within customer communities is primarily based on relationships and identification with other members and, even more importantly, with the group as a whole. Generally, the study revealed that influence within customer communities is relationship-based. Specifically we found that: (1) Private online community members appear more influenced by members who they can relate to rather than by members who present themselves as experts; (2) They are more influenced by their experience with the group as a whole than by specific, influential individuals; (3) Of those members who feel they influence others in their community, the majority self-report that they communicate their ideas effectively, feel strong emotions, and say what they feel.

Influence Perspectives

For over half a century, marketers have sought the “holy grail,” that perfect group of people with specific demographic and psychographic attributes who will recommend their brand to

¹ Walter J. Carl and Steve Duck, “How to Do Things With Relationships...and How Relationships Do Things With Us,” in *Communications Yearbook* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004): 1-35.

masses of less informed or influential people. This group was initially defined when Roper Starch Worldwide conducted its groundbreaking study of Influential Americans – that elite 10-12% of the population that has an impact on the decisions of everyone else. In 1955, social scientists Katz and Lazarsfeld studied this population in-depth and determined that people are more influenced by their peers than by any form of media.² To marketers this reinforced what was already known about the ageless strategy of word-of-mouth. In 1957, Katz determined that influencers can be distinguished by their (1) personification of certain values, (2) competence, (3) strategic social location (4) greater, more frequent exposure to, and use of, the mass media than those whom they influence.³ Marketers have since focused primarily on the last two distinctions, perhaps in part because they can be more easily and objectively reported on than the first two.

In 1991, the Allensbach Survey Center created the Strength of Personality Scale, which ranked respondents' self-perceived levels of influence.⁴ Survey respondents were considered influential if they felt they were successful in everything they do, were rarely unsure about how they should behave, were always responsible, were likely to take the lead in group situations, enjoyed convincing others of their opinions, and were good at getting what they want. Continuing to the present, the method of profiling people based on self-perceived levels of influence has dominated market research. In conducting their research for *The Influentials*, Keller and Berry asked Americans about their income, education, marital status, home ownership, values, how current they are with contemporary media, and added other variables (activity in local affairs, engagement in both their workplace and personal lives, and interest in conversational subjects).⁵ They additionally asked questions about self-perceived size of social networks.

In a recent Brandweek interview, Columbia sociology professor and social-networking guru Duncan Watts questioned the dominant use of the influencer theory by marketers⁶. "All of these character types may or may not play important roles in the process of social change, but the problem is that each type exerts quite different kinds of influence in quite different ways." He feels that marketers should focus less on *which* people influence and more on *how* people are influenced. "...identifying easily influenced people, and how they are influenced, raises different questions that requires different research design than looking for influentials."

Watts is not the first person to suggest that influence should be studied and analyzed from additional perspectives. In the social sciences, in 1973, Rosenberg broke away from the dominant strategy and suggested that influence research move beyond self-reported

² Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1955).

³ Elihu Katz, "The Two-Step Flow of Communication. An Up-to-Date Report on a Hypothesis," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1957): 67-78.

⁴ Gabriel Weimann, "The Influentials: Back to the Concept of Opinion Leaders?," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1991): 269-271.

⁵ Ed Keller and Jon Berry, *The Influentials: One American in Ten Tells the Other Nine How to Vote, Where to Eat, and What to Buy* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003).

⁶ Todd Wasserman, "Buzz-Kill: Colombia Prof Blast Influencer Model," *Brandweek*. (March 7, 2007) <http://www.brandweek.com>.

testimonies of influence and stated that influence must be studied from the perspective of the recipient, from “the eye of the beholder.”⁷

Source Perspective	Recipient Perspective
Self-report	Report on others
Participants are asked to report on <i>their own</i> influence on <i>others</i>	Participants are asked to report on how <i>others</i> influence <i>them</i>

In 1975 Mettlin and Hsu suggested that it would be better to analyze influence from both the perspective of the recipient and the perspective of the source in order to fully understand the entire social system in which the act takes place.⁸ In their research with high school students they determined that influence is determined by exposure; that people must be exposed to people that influence them for a significant amount of time, and must play an important role in the life of the person being influenced. This suggests that a close relationship is necessary in order for people to be influenced. Rogers and Beal agreed, “Many reasons are cited for the importance of personal influence in the decision-making process. In most cases the people who interact have similar values, a common level of discourse and are important referents to each other. Not only is the information communicated but the degree and intensity of feeling or conviction is also communicated.”⁹

In a time when traditional mass marketing techniques are being questioned, it makes sense to re-examine the influencer theory by expanding our focus, looking beyond the self-reported attributes of the influencer to the perceptions of the recipient (the “influencee”) and to the ingredients of the influence process. The following paper explores influence within private online customer communities. We look at influence from both the recipient and source perspectives, and emerge with some insights about influence as a process rooted in relationships.

Methodology

Communispace helps global organizations tap into the voices of their customers. This is done by building, managing, and facilitating private online customer communities. These

⁷ Morris Rosenberg, “Which significant others?” *American Behavioral Scientist* (July-August, 1973): 829-860.

⁸ Curt Mettlin and Michael Hsu, “Alternative Concept for the Study of the Significance of Influentials,” *Rural Sociology* (Summer, 1975): 153-155.

⁹ Everett Rogers and George Beal, “The Importance of Personal Influence in the Adoption of Technological Changes,” *Social Forces* (May, 1958): 329-335.

communities are intimate environments where 300-500 invited prospects and customers regularly spend time brainstorming ideas, sharing emotions and experiences, discussing trends, and helping companies figure out marketing and business issues. Members get to know one another and often form close relationships. They reveal candid personal information and experiences with each other as well as with the companies that sponsor their communities. For these reasons, we felt that Communispace communities would be a unique venue for exploring influence.

“A community is made up of actively connected personal relationships. These relationships significantly shape how people come to understand their world...”

In particular, because people in our communities interact with one another on a regular and ongoing basis over the course of months or even years, and because much of that interaction consists of members seeking and offering advice, we had a unique opportunity to study influence from the recipient perspective as contrasted with the source perspective.

We constructed a survey that qualitatively and quantitatively asked if and how members are influenced in Communispace communities as well as in their daily lives. We decided to use a behavioral definition and told respondents that *“for the sake of this survey we will be considering influence to be something said (or done) by another member that caused you to think or behave differently about an idea, product, company, or other meaningful aspect of your life.”*

Community members were asked multiple-choice questions from the source and recipient perspectives:

Recipient Perspective Questions

- ▶ *Are you influenced by other members of this community?*
- ▶ *Are you influenced by specific members in this community?*
- ▶ *Why were you influenced in this community?*
- ▶ *How were you influenced in this community?*

Source Perspective Questions

- ▶ *Do you feel that you influence others in this community?*
- ▶ *Why do you feel that you influence others in this community?*
- ▶ *Do you feel that you influence others in your daily life?*

They were also asked to qualitatively explain their answers to each of the questions listed. The survey received a total of 883 respondents from 10 different communities. Each community is different; each has its own demographics, personalities, and culture. Throughout this paper we report on individual community variables that affected the data.

Key Findings

The recipient perspective proved to be a necessary method for exploring influence within private online communities. We found that most of the members we surveyed claimed to be “independent thinkers” and not easily influenced. Members also said that they are far more influenced by the group as a whole than by any particular member. When they did speak of individuals, members said that they are more influenced by members whom they can relate to compared to members that present themselves as experts. We also found that influence within these communities manifests itself in different ways, particularly through changes in attitudes and behavior.

Through the source perspective we determined that members consider others in their online community to be peers and that, in general, feel they have more influence over “real life” relationships (e.g., children, students, co-workers, and family members) – relationships that tend to be fraught with more power dynamics and authority issues than the egalitarian online setting in which community interactions take place.

The Data

Most members claimed that they are not easily influenced. The most common theme was that of the “independent thinker.” Members felt that they are not easily influenced by others in the community: *“I am pretty much an independent thinker who makes her own choices regardless of what someone else thinks.”* This theme of independence extends to their daily lives: *“I am not the type of person that is influenced very easily or very often. I pretty much do what I feel is right or what I feel I need to do.”* This makes sense when you consider the larger social system within which this interaction takes place. We live in an individualistic society and a political climate in which acknowledging that one has been influenced is perceived as a sign of weakness or lack of moral character. Social psychologists O’Brien and Kollock explain, “The hero of U.S. society is the individual, an independent and self-sufficient person, a self-starter who is always looking ahead.”¹⁰ This hero ideology is rooted in our history, supported in our popular culture, and maintained through our mass media. For these reasons it is quite understandable that community members were not so willing to report being influenced.

Community members are far more influenced by the group as a whole than by particular people. Of those that claimed to be influenced in their community, a clear majority said that it was not because of the contributions of specific members. The qualitative question that corresponded with this quantitative question revealed that this is because members feel like they are influenced by the community as a whole: *“I was influenced by all of the answers from everyone...”* This could suggest that there is a sense of egalitarianism among members: *“I would have to say that [I was influenced by a] combination of all postings. I have learned so much from everyone here that it actually has changed my life...”*

¹⁰ Jodie O’Brien and Peter Kollock, *The Production of Reality: Essays and Readings on Social Interaction* (Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 1997).

Members form close bonds and are influenced by everyone: *“Everyone here is like a close friend to me so I take everything everyone says to heart.”*

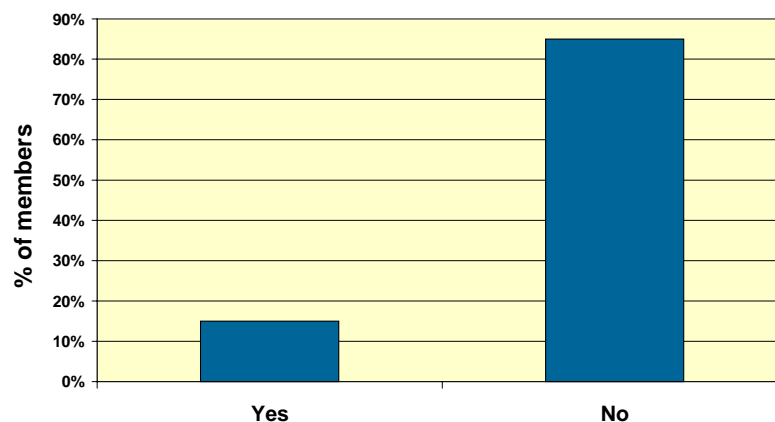
This finding is consistent with current understandings of community within the field of communication studies. Walter Carl and Steve Duck explain the power of the group, “A community is made up of actively connected personal relationships. These relationships significantly shape how people come to understand their world, gain a sense of the validity and verifiability of their ideas, and become accountable for the changes in their attitudes and behavior.”¹¹

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We know that people do not make decisions in a vacuum, but the current understanding this process is based on a view of influence solely as it is exercised between *individuals*. Duncan Watts explains how this line of thinking is misleading: “It is relatively easy for us to imagine how we might influence a single individual, or as an individual be influenced. So it’s tempting to think that influencing a lot of people is just like influencing an individual many times over (mass media marketing is, in effect, based on this simple principle).”¹²

In this light (and as the following chart suggests), **the social process of the group is much more important than the individual attributes of a few powerful individuals within it.**

Are there specific members in this community whose posts you make a point of reading (n = 178)?



The data shown above is also partially a reflection of how we manage our communities. Unlike public message boards, Communispace communities are managed by trained

¹¹ Walter J. Carl and Steve Duck, “How to Do Things With Relationships...and How Relationships Do Things With Us,” in *Communications Yearbook* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004): 1-35.

¹² Todd Wasserman, “Buzz-Kill: Colombia Prof Blast Influencer Model,” *Brandweek*. (March 7, 2007) <http://www.brandweek.com>.

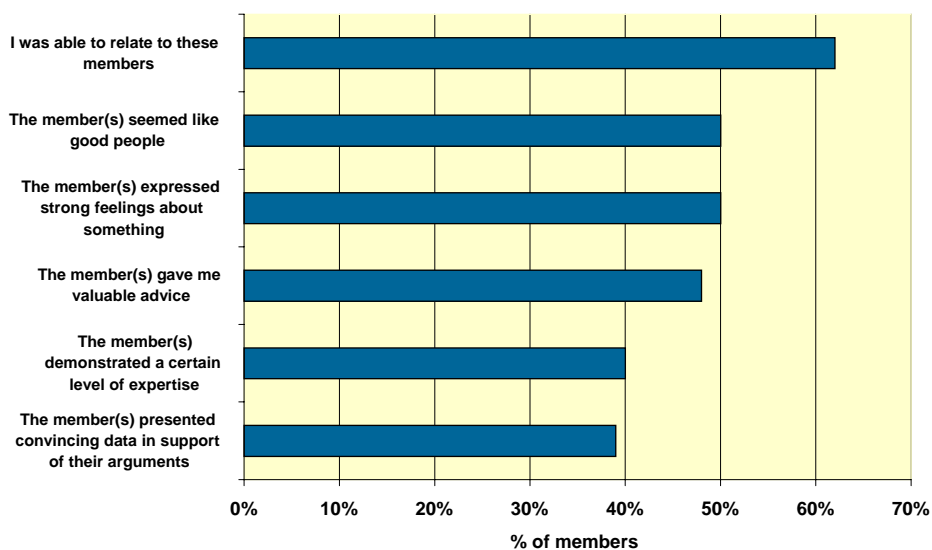
facilitators that work to probe members for additional information about topics that matter to our clients. More importantly, they work to create an environment in which all members feel heard and multiple viewpoints are honored. For this reason, it makes sense that members did not report being influenced by specific members, but by the group as a whole.

Identification trumps expertise: Members appear more influenced by members that they can relate to than those that present themselves as experts. Aristotle believed

that *ethos*, or persuasive acts, are effective when one establishes one's own reputation as an expert. Carl and Duck explain how since then researchers have accepted this as common sense: "Since Aristotle's initial work, researchers have conceptualized ethos in terms of credibility of a message source, which can be further broken down into such characteristics as expertness, trustworthiness, and dynamism."¹³ However, through the recipient perspective, we were able to determine that in our communities, commonality, authenticity, and emotional expression generally mattered more than expertise. More members reported being influenced by members that they can relate to, expressed strong feelings, seemed like good people, and gave valuable advice. These qualities seem to be more important than demonstrating a certain level of expertise and presenting convincing data in support of his/her arguments.

"I firmly believe when you take a group of women from all walks of life and put them in a group like this they influence one another...you come to know them and feel close to them which is a wonderful thing..."

Why were you influenced (n = 373)?



¹³ Walter J. Carl and Steve Duck,

The majority of members who claimed to be influenced said that they felt like they could relate to the person (or people) who influenced them, citing commonalities in age or shared experiences or values as being more important than background, *“I think we’re all about the same ages, give or take a few years. Even though we’ve all come from different backgrounds, most seem to be pretty level headed and logical.”* Members also spoke of how people they can relate to specifically influence them to try new products. *“I was influenced by a woman that seemed to be like me and with her everyday use [of the community] and experiences they have I feel like I can relate to her more and look forward to seeing what products she purchases and how it works for her.”* This is consistent with the work of sociologist Norman Denzin, who determined that one person is influenced by another *“as a person”* more than *“as an expert”* and that the best way to influence someone is by appealing to their *“global self esteem.”*¹⁴

“I’m more likely to try a product if a real person says it’s good or worth a try and since this community is usually really honest with their opinions, I trust product reviews that come from them ...”

The personal quality and authenticity of the influencer was also often cited. Members were influenced by others because *“they seemed to be really good people.”* Members relate to people who present themselves as being *“real people:”* *“I’m more likely to try a product if a real person says its good or worth a try and since this community is usually really honest with their opinions, I trust product reviews that come from them.”* Honesty also appeared to be important: *“The people in this community are honest, down-to-earth, and genuine. Some ideas and views on subjects are real and can help with various situations in our lives.”* All of these styles of influence exist because members interact in an environment in which they are able to get to know each other.

“[I was influenced] when we did that online chat study involving the selling of a television to a young couple ...not a week later I purchased a large television for my own home ...”

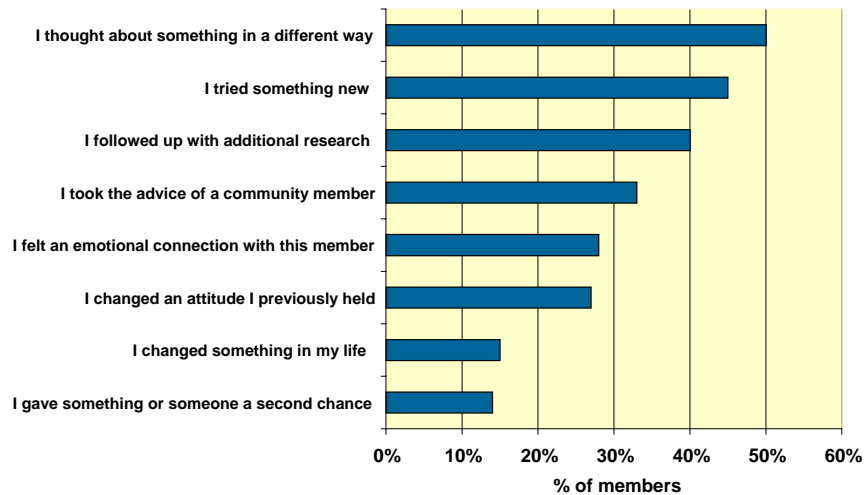
Even in those communities where expertise and supporting data played a more prominent role in influence – such as in financial services communities – the credibility of the influencer is of paramount importance. That credibility is in turn based on repeated encounters over time. As one member put it, *“There has to be a certain amount of creditability (sic) for me to take information seriously. People need to have facts and an ability to present the facts without appearing too biased.”* This credibility stems from trusting the source or person transmitting the information, which occurs through the establishment of a trusting relationship between members within their communities.

Influence is manifested in multiple ways – through changes in attitudes and behavior. Of the members who claimed to be influenced, a majority reported that they

¹⁴ Norman K. Denzin, “The significant others of a college population,” *Sociological Quarterly* (Summer, 1966): 298-310.

thought about something in a different way. Members also said that they changed a previous attitude, took the advice of a community member, and followed up with additional research.

How were you influenced (n = 352)?

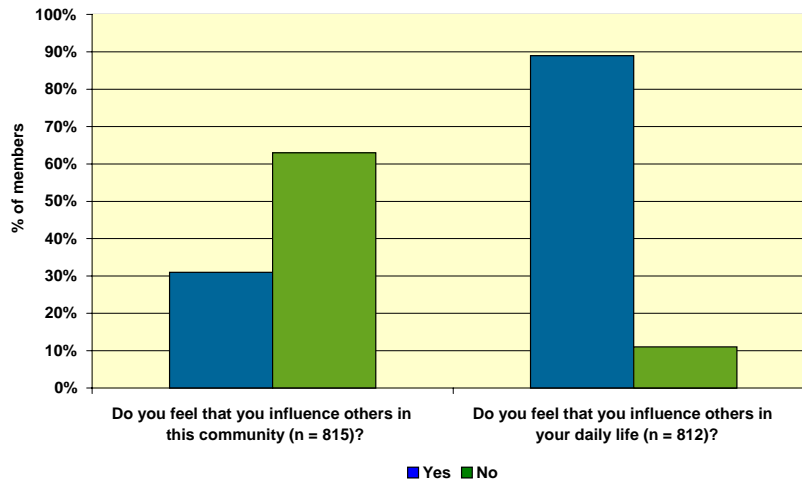


Of the types on influence we tested, the greatest number of members reported being influenced to think about something in a different way because of their experience in their communities. One member said, *"Hearing about someone else's experiences and how they handle them causes me to reflect on my own life."* Members also reported being influenced to try something new. Often, this was a product or service, *"[I was influenced] when we did that online chat study involving the selling of a television to a young couple ...not a week later I purchased a large television for my own home, because of the influence of not only [youth community member], but from this chat in general and how beneficial a large television would be for my social life."* Community members influenced others to conduct further research about something that was brought up in a conversation within their community: *"Much of the influence deals with additional research, in anything from online banks to Wal-Mart's employment practices to graduated driver's licenses in various states. I've learned a tremendous amount just from ideas and thoughts others have mentioned."* As we mentioned earlier, members give and receive a lot of advice within their communities and this is can influential, *"The most important [advice that I got] was that I ousted an absolutely horrible kid from my class. I benefited from the wisdom of the ladies on this site in that since getting rid of him, I haven't had a migraine. ...eight months migraine free!!!"*

The physical world still matters. Although members bond within our communities, these bonds obviously cannot compare to the bonds they form with their family and friends. For this

reason **community members feel that they are more influential in their daily lives than they are in their online communities.**

Community v. Everyday Influence



Members feel that the influence they exert in their everyday lives is due to the roles they play and the proximity to those whom they influence. Many said that they were influential because they are parents: *"I am a father that stays involved with my kids as much as possible. Passing things on to the next generation is the best type of influence anyone could have in my opinion."* They also talked about how their occupations bring them close to people. This was particularly true for teachers: *"I am a teacher, and I believe I influence my students. They often don't understand the importance of education but there are times when you catch a glimpse when the kids get it..."*

They are also influential in their actions and behavior: *"I try to influence people through good actions and supportive behavior. I have the benefit of a fairly wide-ranging background of experiences, both personal and professional, and I often can make comparisons to current situations to experiences and help direct activities toward a positive end."*

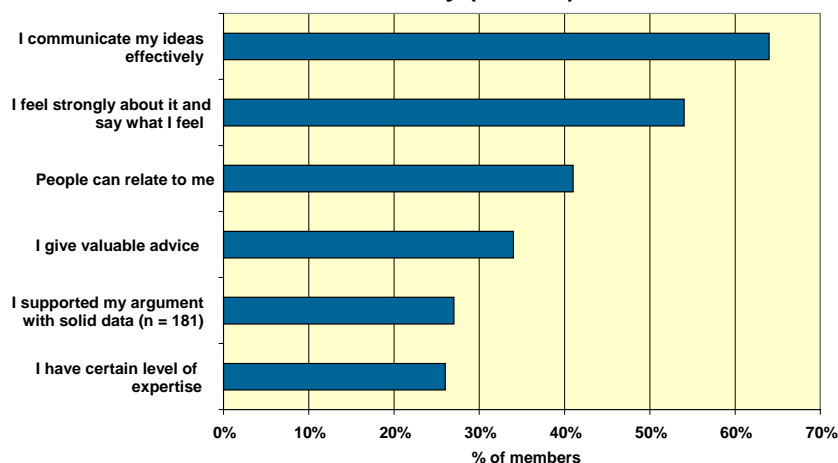
Self-described Influencers echo recipients' beliefs about *why* they're influential – they said that they communicate their ideas effectively, feel strong emotions, and say what they feel.

"The people in this community are honest, down-to-earth, and genuine..."

Expressing strong feelings, giving honest opinions, using concise language, organizing thoughts, and being respectful are all important characteristics for effective influential behavior.

It may be that online communities represent an opportunity for people to exit their customary roles (and the responsibilities that come with them) to engage with peers in an open and egalitarian setting. It stands to reason, then, that influence may occur somewhat differently in online communities than it does within the context people's daily life. It is noteworthy, however, that members reported using similar influence styles—expression of feeling, conveyance of honesty and passion, being respectful—across virtual and “real life” contexts.

Why do you feel that you were able to influence others in this community (n = 249)?



In the qualitative section of the survey members gave additional insights into how they influence others in their daily lives. Influential members show other people in their lives respect: *“I try to treat all other people – no matter their status or occupation---with kindness and respect. Hopefully, they pass that behavior on to others.”* They also help others: *“I try to be helpful and considerate, and I feel that I can back up my beliefs with facts.”*

More traditional Influencer attributes surfaced as well. Members consider themselves influential because other people ask them for advice *“I feel that I am kind of a natural born leader. I take the time to educate myself on a variety of topics and find that I am often the person that my friends and family seek out for information and advice.”* They try new things and are opinionated: *“I give my opinions readily and am often the first to try new things, so others often ask me for advice.”* ...and have a positive outlook on life: *“My positive outlook helps people look at the bright side of things. I also encourage learning and education.”*

Implications

These findings don't negate the traditional profile of an “Influential,” but they *do* suggest that one need not fit that profile to have an influence on others. By focusing on the process and

recipient perspective, what becomes apparent is that influence is informed by the members' knowledge of and experience with one another, and by the duration of that relationship over time. Whether members are influenced by passion, goodness, or *their personal knowledge of* someone else's expertise, relationship is the dominant factor in consumer-to-consumer influence.

Thus companies seeking to create or leverage word-of-mouth influence among consumers may not be best-served by viral marketing stunts or reliance on bloggers who are deemed to be influential. Rather, they will likely benefit more by creating their *own* relationships with consumers, and by visibly and selflessly fostering consumers' relationships with one another.

Communispace

Communispace Corporation, headquartered in Watertown, Massachusetts, is a leading marketing technology and services firm that specializes in creating online communities used by major corporations to build relationships with customers that produce continuous insights, foster co-innovation and increase loyalty. Founded in 1999, the company has created more than 250 customer communities for global corporations including: Kraft, Hewlett-Packard, Charles Schwab, Hallmark, Unilever, GlaxoSmithKline, Avon, Hilton Hotels, General Mills, the Chicago Tribune, PepsiCo, and many more.

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