

## Five Ways to Develop a Dialogue with Key 'Influencers'

BY NILOFER MERCHANT, JANUARY 16, 2007

When you want to buy a new BBQ, whom do you ask? If you want to know which smartphone to buy, what blog do you read? And if you're looking for a school in which to enroll your child, whose advice do you seek? Those people you're calling, e-mailing, or reading—they're special... the alpha crowd: They are influencers. Not just one person or type, influencers are many people who form a unique profile. Parts of that profile are common across the entire group of influencers, and many are specific to the category we're talking about. So, the school advice might come from the BBQ expert, but probably not.

In this Web 2.0 era of ready access to information everywhere, anytime, we've got a new class of people to whom business and marketing people can and should pay attention.

Those of you old enough to remember, there was a time when you couldn't Google up information to find out what the opinion makers and advocates were thinking. Amazon didn't exist, so we couldn't see what others worldwide thought of a book and learn of its sales ranking. Instead, we had to go to places like churches or synagogues, grocery stores and book clubs, and ultimately hang around with neighbors to find out what "the news" was.

That's because influencers were active, engaged members of local communities. They've always existed—opinion makers and opinion leaders. What's different now? Today they have a much bigger bullhorn available to them—it's called the Web. Where they once talked to 100 people in a month, they can now reach thousands or tens of thousands with a single click, comment, or ranking process.

These alpha influencers are the key to other customers' awareness, consideration, preference, and purchase. They advocate, rank, sort, evaluate, and ultimately create marketplace adoption. They come in the form of users, developers, channel partners, and press people. Many PR

people have thought of influencers as "their audience" or writers, but influencers are way more than analysts and writers. They are ultimately the tip of the market.

I recently read the book *Influentials* by Ed Keller and Jon Berry. This is a great resource for getting some frame of reference on the core aspects of influencers.

Influencers are key conduits of information. It's as if your Aunt Louise suddenly became the world's leading authority on nonfat yogurt and people throughout the world recognized her. Influencers know many people and are in contact with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people in the course of a week. They have a powerful multiplier effect, spreading the word quickly across a broad network when they find something they want others to know about.

General guidelines: they are well-traveled, almost always have a religious life, are often leaders (civic, business, nonprofit), and generally hold an activist approach to life. Almost always, they have a general sense of optimism because they believe in the power of good, they like people, love to orchestrate ideas, and they tend to be (but not always) great at building relationships.

Interesting statistic: four in ten have a connection to a professional association. This is a sign of their restless

intellectual interests. Influencers continuously take input from what they see, hear, read, and keep turning it over in their mind for new insights and ideas. They are sometimes entrepreneurs.

Typically they start to be an influencer by getting involved in the community. My husband is not traditionally a mover or shaker (his words, not mine), yet he's gotten involved in the Los Gatos Chamber of Commerce. His vocabulary has changed. He refers to the city we live in as "our city" now.

Influencers and alpha consumers are people who place importance on values: enduring love, knowledge, authenticity, stable personal relationships, learning, and freedom. When you can get them to pay attention to your offer/product/solution, you have the opportunity to shape the market.

So, now the big question: How can we better understand them? What makes them tick? How do they spread influence? Can I persuade them to spread the word for my product/service/organization idea?

Most companies don't know what to do to systematically guide these consumer marketing advocates. But we've been designing a few leading-edge programs for some notable brands and here's what I know to be true: You can build a "program" that will enable you to access and develop a dialogue with these key influencers.

### **1SELECTION/SORT MATTERS**

Influencers need to be sought out. They do not run in packs. They are more likely to be leading the pack, but that's not necessarily the case. These are also not the early adopters (who often like technology stuff or new stuff for its own sake and are willing to be irritated first). So the key is to figure out what would make a good influencer for your product/service/category/idea. Then think hard about where they would hang out and how can you find them.

You can go to online forums to see who is commenting. You can check Amazon profiles as sometimes this is the

"recommended list" guy or gal. For each market, you need to find the few among the many.

For one project, we found 100 people, then sorted them down to eight. It took us two weeks of online activity—recruiting from established forums, asking who else was good, and asking other questions—to get the 100. It's a time-intensive, judgment-intensive process. While it might be tempting to delegate this to your most junior staff member, this job more likely belongs to the most senior person. Getting a group of key folks is the most important part of building a strong program.

Developing a screener for what you are looking for will help you avoid getting lost in the forest.

### **2SIZE MATTERS**

Yes, it's true. Size does matter. Build a group—right-sized, of course. Having 8-10 in a group is the right mix. Any more and people don't listen well to one another. Any fewer and the momentum and energy aren't there. That said, make the term of your influencer program about six months and then rotate people off and on, to keep people who can build your point of view and market access. In addition to the 8-10 users from the market, you want to involve 5-10 people from your business unit or company to listen, engage, and commit to nurturing this group with ideas, content, and other "sticky" items.

### **3TWO-WAY FLOW IS CRITICAL**

The key to building an influencer program is communication. The specifics of that are dependent on the influencers and the product. For a software product, it might be getting clear on industry standards and vertical understanding, or doing beta reviews. For a mobile audience, it would be a different list of program requirements. But fundamental to all that is communication. And just to be clear, it's person-to-person, not company-to-person. Doing the corporate-speak, highly vetted program will only make influencers despise you. You need to have someone on your team be the influencer's advocate—to listen, learn, ask and probe.

Because influencers are fundamentally good relationship people, you want the people on your team to be good communicators, bloggers, writers and all that. You want to build trust with these influencers because trust matters hugely to them. While your executive team will want “results,” you need your evangelist and advocate for this audience to buffer that and focus on building an information flow that benefits both the company and the consumer. Have them test-drive beta products and critique them. Have them take a look at your market positioning statements and fix it. You get the picture—open the kimono.

#### **4 WITHOUT LISTENING, YOU’RE DEAD ALREADY**

Make sure your door is not shut when these opinion leaders, alpha consumers, and influencers come to you with a complaint or a question. You must pay attention to what influencers are saying because their comments provide an early indicator of what others are thinking. True to form, influencers swing into gear and hit their best notes when they can solve a problem.

Remember that influencers are helping you with their “noise.” In return, they want respect, communication, social validation/approval in front of others; they want to be liked and any form of authority; and... (drum roll, please) they want the opportunity to influence you. Perhaps that was too obvious? Perhaps not.

#### **5 SPREAD THE WORD USING A CALCULATED SET OF STEPS**

To know whether you are doing a good job on an influencer strategy means knowing that the opinion leaders are getting their ideas circulated. Find out the kinds of publications, reviews, articles, radio stations they listen to, Web sites they visit. Learn where they are going because that will tell you where the next concentric circle of influencers is located.

When people make decisions today, it’s a conversation.

The Internet has broadened the conversation, allowing people to research purchases, post questions to companies, link to other consumers, e-mail their friends, forward Web links, and develop bulletin-board relationships with people of similar interests.

The conversation level between users and consumers is rising. In times of change, people naturally seek a guide, someone who’s been out ahead of them, who’s already identified the issues, addressed them in his/her own life, and can offer good, reliable, informed perspectives, advice and information about what’s going on now and what’s to come. In other words, someone they trust. That’s the influencer.

Welcome that guy or gal into your offer, and you’ll have a strategic advantage.

Who is yours? ■

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