

Are Influentials... Influential?

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Executive Summary. Who are the “important people?” Who are the “Influentials?” For decades, marketers have struggled to identify that near-mythical collection of people who are charismatic enough to lead thousands of consumers to embrace any given idea or commercial product. Since the advent of social media, this search has intensified. Best-selling authors like Malcolm Gladwell continue to insist that once organizations identify and partner with these individuals, their influence will spread like a virus, rapidly infecting everyone in their networks and beyond. However, more recent studies by scientists like Duncan Watts, Danah Boyd, and Bernardo Huberman reveal that there is no guarantee that the people with the most friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter are the most influential. Instead, influence is not a matter of who you are, but rather whether people want to hear what you say and are willing to pass it along. Ultimately, these communication experts claim that content will trump celebrity in the battle for hearts, minds, and dollars.

Keywords: social media, Twitter, Influentials, communication, marketing, metapatterns, networks, viral, celebrity, content

Attribution.

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Background. They are perhaps the most sought after people in the world. They are “popular,” “connected,” and above all, “influential.” These are the individuals who wield remarkable powers of persuasion over the populace, inspiring others to embrace or shun any given idea, product or entity. However, the problem of their identification has plagued marketers since 1955, when “Influentials” were first introduced. In *Personal Influence*, sociologists Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld claimed that the most effective advertising reached consumers via a two-step process: companies broadcast messages, which are then seized upon by “opinion leaders” who proselytize their peers (Thompson, 2008). Current champions of this theory, including Malcolm Gladwell, author of national bestseller, *The Tipping Point*, urge companies to target those trendsetters who will be at the forefront of any successful cultural meme. Once these Influentials have been converted to a cause, Gladwell explains, they will leverage their social media stardom to evangelize it to thousands of “friends” and “followers.”

Nevertheless, theory dissenters like Yahoo! scientist Duncan Watts believe “a trend's success depends not on the person who starts it, but on how susceptible the society is overall to the trend” (2007).

In other words, it's “not how persuasive the early adopter is, but whether everyone else is easily persuaded” (Thompson, 2008). Therefore, in order to determine the best way to win friends and influence people online, marketers should review the latest research on how individuals use social networks to effect change and spread information. According to a pair of studies conducted in 2010 focusing on the Twitter platform, it appears that while content often trumps celebrity, it certainly doesn't hurt to be “known” when trying to influence an online audience.

Key Question: Are the “Influentials” of social media networks really capable of inspiring other users to action?

Secondary Questions: How do we measure influence on social networks? Should marketers target “influentials” or “promoters?”

Influencer Marketing. According to *MarketingVOX*, an online news journal, advertising agencies spend more than \$1 billion annually on the implementation of word-of-mouth campaigns aimed specifically at Influentials (Thompson, 2008). As defined by Keller and Berry, this type of “Influencer Marketing” consists of four main activities. First, marketers must identify and rank Influentials in order of their import to a given campaign (Keller and Berry, 2003). If Gladwell and his supporters are to be believed, “in a given process or system, some people matter more than others,” which of course makes them a marketer's most valuable allies (Thompson, 2008). According to Keller and Berry, Influentials must be *activists* (involved in their communities), *trusted* by their peers, *interested* in a diverse array of topics, *connected* to a large number of people, and *trendsetters* (2003). Once Influentials have been identified, the next step is to start marketing directly to them in order to increase their awareness. Then, once they've embraced whatever an organization is promoting, it's time to market *through* and *with* the Influentials to turn the members of their networks into champions of a company's message (Keller and Berry, 2003).

One possible explanation as to why Influentials are so persuasive stems from our cultural reliance on “*termed judgmental heuristics*.” According to psychologist Robert Cialdini, heuristics describe simple thought patterns that work well most of the time, but can result in occasional, costly mistakes if blindly obeyed; for example, the assumption that “if an expert said so, it must be true” (2001). Cialdini calls this the “*click, whirr* approach,” explaining how humans often employ it when they have no time to carefully analyze data they receive from others and choose instead to merely react to previously-established cues (2001). As it applies to social media marketing, one recognizes how individuals rely on “experts” to make sense of the deluge of information coming at them from every channel. For instance, those who follow @MarthaStewart on Twitter believe her to be a cooking “expert.” Therefore, if she endorses a line of kitchen products, her followers are

“Influencer Marketing” as Defined by Keller and Berry (2003):

1. **Identify and Rank** Influentials in order of their import to a given campaign
2. **Market directly to** Influencers to increase their awareness of your organization/product/cause
3. Once these Influentials embrace your product, **market through** them to reach members of their networks
4. After establishing a mutually-beneficial relationship with Influentials, **market with** them, positioning these individuals as champions of your organization’s message

likely to perpetuate these endorsements because they are coming from someone “in the know” and are worth sharing. Ultimately, Martha Stewart’s influence over her followers, due to the expert status they’ve assigned her, affects their consumer behavior. When researchers at Northwestern University [applied](#) their mathematical “influence” algorithm to Twitter, their findings supported this reasoning, revealing that [celebrity] experts in certain fields were more likely to cause topics of discussion to become trends (Axon, 2010).

Industry experts Duncan Brown and Nick Hayes have taken the Influential theory one step further by classifying certain types of Influentials and outlining when in the adoption cycle they are most likely to affect the decisions of other individuals (*see Figure 1*). In this way, marketers can target the “right Influential for the job” at any given point during the campaign (Brown and Hayes, 2008). Technology journalist Clive Thompson argues that the notion “that a tiny cadre of connected people triggers trends is enormously seductive,” largely because it’s cost-effective and requires very little effort on the part of marketers (2008). However, many social

scientists have argued that truly influential people are not necessarily at the heart of extensive social networks. Instead, influence is not a matter of who you are, but whether people want to hear what you say and are willing to pass it along.

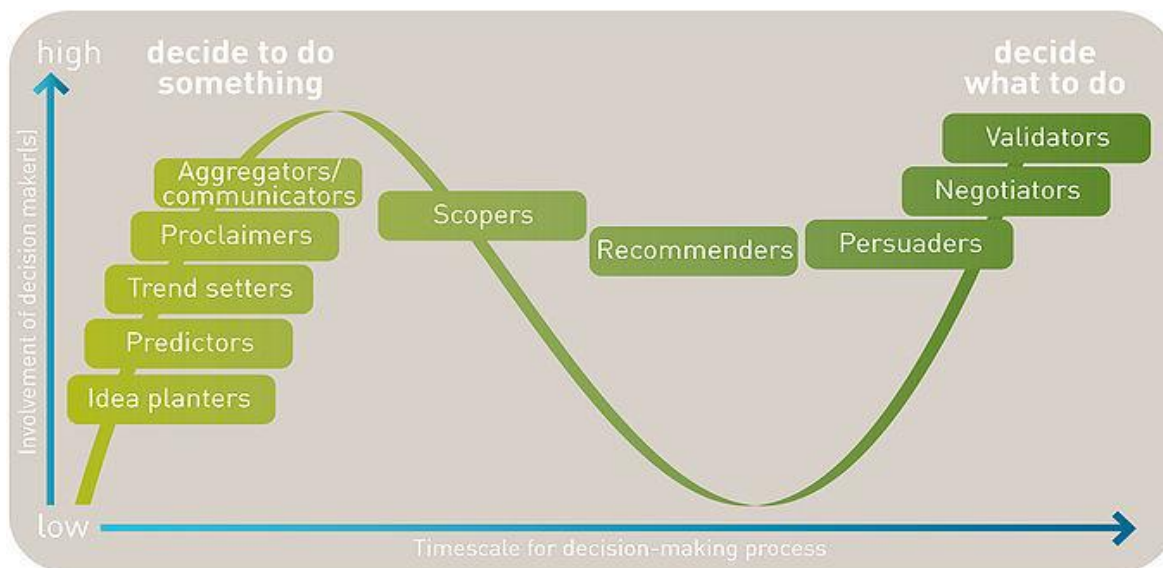


Figure 1- Types of Influentials & the Decision-Making Process ©2008, Duncan Brown and Nick Hayes

Targeting Promoters, Not Influentials. In 2007, Columbia professor Duncan Watts published a paper questioning the validity of the Influential theory. He disliked how none of its supporters, including Gladwell and Keller, ever concretely explained how an Influential influences (Thompson, 2008). The theory was too simple, he argued, and too dismissive of the natural complexity of an idea’s “virality;” arguing that influence spreads like a disease from a single initial carrier isn’t enough, because diseases spread in dissimilar ways (Thompson, 2008). For instance, during his research Watts programmed communication models that

demonstrated how it often takes several conversations to “infect” someone with an idea, rather than a single exposure (2007). Even more common, he says, is not one individual simultaneously influencing thousands, but rather “trend vampires” whose victims become as hyper-persuasive as their sire and spread an idea throughout susceptible networks (Thompson, 2008). “If society is ready to embrace a trend, almost anyone can start one—and if it isn't, then almost no one can,” claims Watts (Thompson, 2008). The Yahoo! research scientist believes influence is less like a virus and more like a forest fire: there are thousands annually, but only a few out-of-control blazes. This is because at those times, conditions were ripe: little rain, an abundance of tinder, etc. In cases like these, Watts says, “any old match will do” (Thompson, 2008). Therefore, in order to increase the likelihood that an idea will spread amongst a large online audience, marketers should spend more time studying the public’s mood and less time hunting for a hip Patient 0. The application of Watts’ theory can best be observed in a couple of recent studies focusing on how users engage others on Twitter, which marketing coach Charles Herbert Brown says is the ideal tool for watching “word of mouth” marketing happening in real time (2010).

New York Times journalist Scott Karp writes that “Twitter users are not influential because they have influential personalities, but because they are early tech adopters who excel at figuring out how to use new web technologies to influence and create link-driven networks” (2008). An important part of developing these networks is the forwarding of content from person to person. According to Twitter spokesman Matt Graves, one quarter of all tweets include a link to another piece of content; with 190 million unique monthly visitors, that means a lot of information is zipping from network to network (Sandoval, 2010). However, unlike a majority of social media platforms, users on Twitter can link to others and see their tweets, but these users need not act in kind. Therefore, one does not necessarily need to “know” Twitter users in order to influence or be influenced by them. For instance, imagine that instead of consulting @MarthaStewart, a tweeting kitchen-shopper stumbles upon the profile of @chefs when searching for people who have used and reviewed the Slap Chop™. If pleased with the recommendation, the user may choose to “retweet” @chefs and consequently report their pleasant experience to an entirely new, though previously-unknown, group of Twitter foodies. “On Twitter, conversations are no longer one-on-one [...] all followers are privy to what is being said. Tom may not tell someone about Al’s restaurant, but six other people who saw the conversation might” (Brown, 2010).

According to marketing researcher Danah Boyd, “spreading tweets [and retweeting] is not simply to get messages out to new audiences, but also to validate and engage with others” (2010). Boyd’s research attempts to clearly identify the reasons why users retweet content and subsequently how companies can broadcast content that is likely to be retweeted. What Boyd et al found is that most users retweet to remind others of their existence as a follower, share content that they think others will appreciate, or “to one’s own advantage, either to get more followers or *reciprocity* from more visible participants – by frequently retweeting their [links]” (2010). Of the latter, Cialdini claims that “one of the most potent of the weapons of influence around us [is] the rule of reciprocity” (2001). Hence, some marketers have taken this to mean that the most influential Twitter users are those who are the most retweeted, and not those with the highest number of followers (Ehrlich, 2010).


Bernardo Huberman, director of Hewlett-Packard’s Social Computing Lab, found that “in order for individuals to become influential they must not only obtain attention and thus be popular, but also overcome user passivity; [the tendency for users to passively consume content rather than sharing it]” (2010). Huberman and his team analyzed 22 million tweets over 300 hours in September 2009 in order to formulate the “IP Algorithm.” This equation assigns Twitter users an “influence score” which takes into account not only their popularity, but the likelihood that others will forward their tweets. “The correlation between popularity and influence is weaker than might be expected,” Huberman concludes (2010). He and his team found that the average Twitter user retweets only one in 318 URLs (Ehrlich, 2010). Huberman et al argue that this reflects a need for people to actively forward content rather than consume it if it is ever to spread beyond a user’s initial network (2010). Nevertheless, in spite of these studies’ apparent support of Watts’ claim that anyone can be an Influential, it should be noted that neither Huberman nor Boyd are arguing that being “known” in one’s network is not important. In fact, both studies found that celebrities and other highly followed users are still in a good position to influence others because their networks are already so large (Boyd et al, 2010).

The Verdict. Ultimately, marketers can gain valuable insights from both the Gladwell and Watts models of influence. As previously stated, the most recent studies on Twitter conducted by Boyd and Huberman imply that if an organization has an audience that actively and consistently forwards its content, it is influential. As Watts says, if a network is receptive to an idea and ready to embrace it out of a belief that it will satisfy some need, anyone can be the “spark” behind an all-encompassing blaze of marketing. However, as indicated by the criteria Huberman et al used when assigning users an “influence score,” the more popular a user initially is, the easier it may be to persuade others to adopt and rebroadcast desired messages about any given topic.

For example, a recent meme to spread quickly through the Internet was “Jenny DryErase,” an attractive young woman who, according to popular blog *The A.V. Club*, quit her job and publically shamed her obnoxious boss in the “best, most cathartic way possible” (Heisler, 2010). Although eventually exposed as a carefully orchestrated hoax by *theChive* and starring an actress named Elyse Porterfield, “Jenny DryErase” was a near-instant success because “it struck a personal cord. And people wanted to share it. To the tune of 238k Facebook shares and 31k tweets” (Tsotsis, 2010). The plan was simple: first, find a girl who photographs well. Next, act as though this young woman sent a blog a collection pictures featuring a series of messages written on a whiteboard detailing her reasons for quitting her job (LEO, 2010). Finally, mention a far-reaching, influential blog like *TechCrunch* within the meme itself, and wait for the Internet to rally to the cute girl’s struggle for independence from a sleazy, incompetent male boss. Even after the hoax was revealed, people continued to support and talk about “Jenny,” including celebrities and the numerous blogs that were forced to publish retractions of their earlier gushing posts.

It's Official: The Best Bosses Read TechCrunch!

by John Biggs on Aug 10, 2010 94 Comments Like 123 Buzz 461



Influencing the “Influentials”


“Anatomy of a Meme”

(all images © 2010 their original owners)

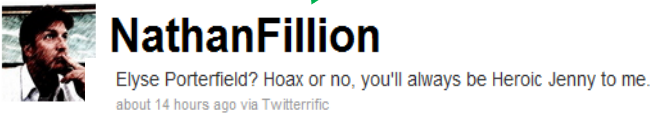
THE A.V. CLUB BLOG

Cute Girl + Emotional Catharsis = meme

Great job, Internet!: Girl quits job in best, most cathartic way possible (or *DID* she?—ed)

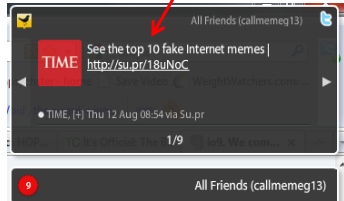


The “aftermath”



NathanFillion

Elyse Porterfield? Hoax or no, you'll always be Heroic Jenny to me. about 14 hours ago via Twittrific



All Friends (callmemeg13)

TIME

See the top 10 fake internet memes | <http://su.pr/18uN0C>

TIME, (+) Thu 12 Aug 08:54 via Su.pr 1/9

All Friends (callmemeg13)

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The “Jenny DryErase” meme resulted in what Watts labels a “cascade of influence” (2007). In short, because any “cascade” requires intimate, word-of-mouth communication, campaigns need to include some “six-degree” effect that will motivate users to forward content to their closest contacts and then beyond (see *Figure 2 for an illustration of this model*). In this case, it was the feeling that “Jenny” was relatable. However, Watts cautions, “since you can never know which person is going to spark the fire, you should aim the ad at as broad a market as possible—and not waste money chasing ‘important’ people” (Thompson, 2008). In the saga of “Jenny,” it cost very little, besides Porterfield’s salary, for *theChive* to post the photos and subsequently gain exposure in influential blogs like *TechCrunch* and *The A.V. Club*.

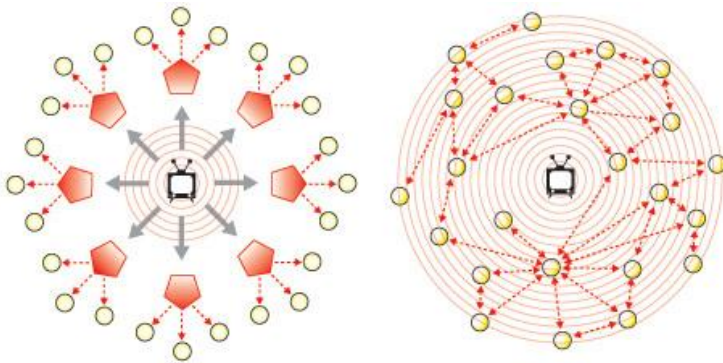


Figure 2- Influencer Marketing vs. Mass Marketing that Creates a “Cascade Effect” © 2008, Duncan Watts

Business Recommendations. Both Gladwell and Watts use *metapatterns* to illustrate their notion of how influence spreads through a system of linked networks. As defined by psychologist James Grier Miller in *Living Systems*, “one system may have one or more variables, each of which varies comparably to a variable in another system” (Evans, 2010). Within each system, there are nodes. Each node is connected to a certain number of other nodes, along which signals are sent throughout the network dependent on the strength of these connections, the signal itself, and the system’s “threshold to fire” (Evans, 2010). In social networks this same pattern exists (see *Figure 3*), with the exception that the “threshold to fire” is really the network’s “threshold to forward” content from person to person (Evans, 2010).

Network Property	Brain	Social Media	Epidemic
# of nodes	neurons	people	people
# of connections	# of synapses	# of “influence channels”	# of contacts
strength of signal	intensity of impulse	appeal of content	reproduction rate of virus
strength of connections	thickness of axons	intimacy of friendships	intimacy of contacts
threshold to fire	threshold of sodium channels	likelihood to forward	likelihood of infection

Figure 3- Metapatterns, Social Media, and the Spread of Ideas © 2010 David C. Evans

As evidenced by recent studies, for an idea to spread across networks, its members must be motivated to overcome their natural passivity and share it with others, whether out of a sense of loyalty to a celebrity user or simply because they think others will be receptive. Therefore, if a company wants social media users to promote their content, and thus increase their influence over others, it should first check that promoted links are appealing to the target public. Copywriter Jeff Sexton takes this idea one step further, arguing that you can inspire individuals to act by giving them “the information or context they need to draw the conclusions you want” and by appealing to previously identified “truths, biases, and prejudices” (2010). Organizations can achieve this mental “inception” via messages that contain penetrating, engaging content that a large number of people will take ownership of and redistribute.

According to Boyd, Huberman et al found that “users who @reply one another form a more significant network of ties” and “respondents consistently sought to account for their audience when choosing what to

retweet” (2010). Hence, it is logical that those organizations to which Huberman et al awarded the highest IP-Influence scores (see Figure 4), including @mashable and @smashingmag, cater largely to the tech-savvy users of Twitter (2010). Followers of these organizations retweet and spread this content through a wide array of networks comprised of marketers, designers, educators, and other industries impacted by technology.

Figure 4- Users with the most IP-influence (at least 10 URLs retweeted)
© 2010 Huberman et al.

Mashable	Social Media Blogger
Jokoanwar	Film Director
Google	Google News
Aplusk	Actor
Syfy	Science Fiction Channel
Smashingmag	Online Developer Magazine
Michellemalkin	Conservative Commentator
Theonion	News Satire Organization
Rww	Tech/Social Media Blogger
Breakingnews	News Aggregator

To further ensure content has the potential to go “viral,” companies must simplify the mechanics of sharing in order to overcome user passivity. Accomplishing this requires organizations do more than allow users to link to their content from social media platforms, thus “unify[ing] consuming and forwarding into the same action” (Evans, 2010). Instead, companies should promote content that is easy to “boil down;” users should be able to state its value in a single, pithy sentence. As Boyd explains, “the brevity of messages allows them to be produced, consumed, and shared without a significant amount of effort, allowing a fast paced conversational environment to emerge” on platforms like Twitter (2010). Furthermore, to fully encourage retweeting, companies should recall there is “a strategic dimension to twittering where if one wants to be retweeted, they must make it easy for others to retweet them” (Boyd et al, 2010). This means leaving room within the 140 character limit for the “RT @” replies.

Finally, once an organization has identified their brand’s top promoters, it is important to reward forwarding behaviors (Evans, 2010). Users who have publically become “fans” of an organization on Facebook, or have supported them by tweeting about a given topic, have made a commitment to that brand. Cialdini writes, “once we make a choice or take a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment” (2001). Therefore, organizations can best influence their fans/followers by constantly putting forth content that validates and rewards a user’s original decision to support them. For example, Huberman et al report that “during the data collection period, some of the users in this [high IP-Influence] category ran very successful retweeting contests where users who retweeted their URLs would have a chance of winning a prize” (2010).

To Influence Users to Share Your Content:

1. Promote content that is penetrating and engaging; stress messages that a large number of people will take ownership of and redistribute.
2. Simplify the mechanics of sharing in order to overcome user passivity; unify consuming and forwarding into the same action.
3. Reward forwarding behaviors; promote content that validates and rewards a user’s original decision to support your organization.

Areas for Future Research. Nevertheless, although meeting these conditions may create a user culture that is primed and ready to act as a network of Influentials, before marketers and business owners can

accurately verify how much influence some individuals hold over others, there needs to be more studies that observe what Watts calls “influence in action; No researcher [...] including Keller--ever analyzes interactions between specific Influentials and the friends they're supposedly influencing” (Thompson, 2008). Previously, designing such studies have been difficult because online word-of-mouth marketing only accounts for seven to ten percent of the reported exchanges between consumers, while the majority occurs in face-to-face interpersonal settings offline (Carl, 2006). “These findings are especially provocative since they emerge at a time when more and more organizations are paying attention to how their brands are discussed online,” explains communications professor Walter Carl. “Thus, it is important for organizations to keep both online and offline conversations on their radar screen” (2006). In other words, if companies are really looking to make friends and influence people, they must strive to publish content that is worth talking about, both online and off. For, as Oscar Wilde wisely noted, “the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about.”

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