

Take Me To Your Leader?

[CONNECTIONS](#) [OPINION](#) [STRATEGY](#)

MARK EARLS, HERD 30 JUL 2013

While the traditional "influencer" model seemed plausible, it doesn't reflect how people make real-life decisions. There is no one leader that will spread the message.

If you are a science fiction fan of a certain age, the phrase "take me to your leader" is likely to transport you back to flickering black-and-white images of ray-guns, flying saucers, little green men and plots even clunkier than the sets on which such space-age dramas took place. And yet, this phrase is unwittingly front and center for present-day marketers pursuing an "influential" targeting strategy: focusing on those "special" consumers seen as opinion leaders to whom others look for guidance. Unfortunately, the world doesn't work that way.

Why the Leader Myth is So Enticing

We want the influencer model to work, because it reflects a widely-held folk fantasy that society is like a simple village community based on a clear and visible social hierarchy through which authority is assigned to certain individuals, like the religious leader, the doctor and so on. Further, our training seems only to affirm such a thesis. If you come from a direct marketing background, such a structure seem plausible because of what you've been told about the Pareto Principle, or the 80-20 rule; if you have a more traditional advertising background, the influencer model seems to echo our old spot-buying mentality: if people really are the new media, then surely we should be looking for the most trusted and highest-rated individual in any given population to carry our messages.

Mutual Influence

In the real world, things tend to be different: modern social networks tend to be more fluid and transitory than the influencer theory suggests. They also tend to be looser and more widely distributed than neat little Spirograph-like diagrams assume.

Second, influence tends to be mutual, rather than one-way. In other words, friends and colleagues often influence each other rather than one having primacy over the others. This is the central finding of Nick Christakis' and James Fowler's excellent study of how problems like obesity spread. You're not making me fat: we're making each other fat.

Indeed, humans are more like shoals of fish, with each individual interacting with those around it and largely unaware of those further away.

The Influencer Model Works in Some Instances

There are times when the influencer hypothesis holds, because there continue to be markets and aspects of human life in which expertise and authority are sought out and used to guide the choices of others (technical and semi-pro categories are an obvious example). The problem is it's getting harder and harder to work out who actually knows what and who

is just making a lot of noise; nowadays everyone seems to have an expert opinion and wants to broadcast it to the world. Thanks to mobile and online technologies, we all have access to alternative opinions that readily serve to undermine the authority of any expert we can identify (or at least muddy the waters). Let's be honest here: who hasn't Googled their embarrassing problem before arriving in the doctor's office, only to assert an inaccurate (and possible hilarious) hypothesis upon arrival?

The Accidental Influencer

Beware, in particular, of the "accidental influential" trap: that is, just because an individual has at some point in the past been an important connector, doesn't mean he or she will be again. Each of us has too many connections for this to be the case.

As those in the music industry know too well, it's better to back a broad roster of artists at any moment, rather than hoping lightning strikes over and over.

Strategies Need to Change

In the end, it's best to assume there is no leader to whom you may be taken. More often than not, it's the looser, more distributed type of influence that tends to dominate today's consumer markets and behaviors. This is why things often seem so unpredictable. To counteract such volatility, our targeting strategies need to play the odds more: lighting lots of fires and creating numerous opportunities for people to interact. So before you try to find the "leader," it's worth investigating whether your market actually has any before you grab your raygun and race out the door.

CONNECTIONS OPINION STRATEGY