

An investigation of negative word-of-mouth communication among market mavens

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ABSTRACT

Previous research concerning market mavens has focused on their provision of positive and helpful marketplace information to fellow consumers. The primary purpose of the present study is to examine market mavens' propensity to disseminate both positive and negative information. The key findings support the notion that mavens disseminate both positive and negative marketplace information and do so more frequently than non-mavens. Mavens also communicate this information to more people than do non-mavens. Given mavens' affinity for technology, they have the potential to use technology (e.g., the Internet, cell phones) to rapidly and exponentially spread negative marketplace information and opinions.

This study also provides a more complete picture of mavens via identifying several new characteristics. In addition to their helping nature and self-perceived shopping expertise, mavens are more likely to be variety seekers, risk takers, and individualists than are non-mavens. Also, mavens are asked for information significantly more often than non-mavens.

A multi-step flow model of marketing communications is proposed to highlight the idea that today's mavens use a wide variety of low-tech and high-tech ways to communicate both positive and negative marketplace information and opinions to many other consumers. The potentially devastating effects mavens can have on a firm by disseminating negative marketplace information to numerous other consumers are discussed. To counter this threat, marketers should pay close attention to mavens and quickly address any negative concerns. Companies should also consider proactively disseminating positive word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) to mavens and other consumers.

Keywords: consumer behavior, marketing communications, technology

INTRODUCTION

The market maven concept, which concerns consumers who are very knowledgeable and influential shoppers across numerous product categories, is well-established in the marketing literature (e.g., Elliot and Warfield, 1993; Feick and Price, 1987; Walsh and Mitchell, 2001; Williams and Slama, 1995). Specifically, mavens have been defined as “individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information” (Feick and Price, 1987, p. 85). This definition highlights the notion that mavens are both reactive and proactive information providers. Recent research suggests that market mavens are growing in importance primarily due to two factors: 1) a proliferation of product choice in today’s marketplace and an associated growing need among consumers for help in dealing with more choice; 2) new technology (e.g., the Web), which offers the prospect of facilitating communication between mavens and larger numbers of fellow consumers than ever before (Geissler and Edison, 2005).

Traditionally, market mavens have been characterized as exhibiting helpful marketplace behaviors. For example, mavens tend to give away significantly more coupons than non-mavens (Price et al., 1995). Prior research has focused on mavens’ provision of positive information to fellow consumers. Scholars have called for research to examine whether mavens also disseminate negative information about the marketplace (Slama and Williams, 1990). Nevertheless, little research has been conducted to address this important topic.

Considering the growing importance of market mavens and the well-documented, powerful influence of negative word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) (e.g., Arndt, 1967; Hart et al. 1990, Kotler and Keller, 2006, Richins, 1983, 1987), the lack of research among mavens in this area is a serious omission in the marketing literature. The current investigation seeks to help fill that void.

The research objectives are to:

- 1) examine mavens’ propensity to disseminate negative as well as positive information to fellow consumers.
- 2) describe potential new ways that mavens use technology to communicate with other consumers.
- 3) develop a multi-step flow model of marketing communications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous research suggests that negative word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) has greater influence on customers’ brand evaluations than positive WOMC (e.g., Arndt, 1967; Mizerski, 1982; Richins, 1983, 1987; Wright, 1974). Studies indicate that dissatisfied consumers spread negative WOMC at least twice as often as satisfied consumers tell others about positive product experiences (e.g., Hart et al., 1990; Kotler and Keller, 2006; Richins, 1987). Another study found that if 100 consumers have a bad experience, a retailer may lose between 32 and 36 current or potential customers (Verde Group-Baker Retail Initiative at Wharton, 2006).

Research examining market mavens' dissemination of negative information has been limited. One notable exception is a study that concluded that mavens share both positive and negative information more often than do non-mavens. The findings also indicate that consumers are only slightly more likely to provide positive than negative information, and mavens are about equally as likely as non-mavens to do so (Schneider and Rodgers, 1993). One potential limitation of this study involves the sample, which was restricted to adult women. While some research has indicated that mavens are more likely female (e.g., Feick and Price, 1987; Higie et al., 1987), other studies have not supported this assertion (e.g., Abratt et al., 1995; Geissler and Edison, 2005; Slama and Williams, 1990; Walsh and Mitchell, 2001).

Another study indicated that postswitching (i.e., after a customer has switched away from a service provider) negative word-of-mouth (PNWOM) in the telecommunications industry was explained, in part, by market mavenism. Service customers were more likely to spread PNWOM about a dropped service provider as the level of market mavenism increased (Wangenheim, 2005). Prior to this research, market mavenism had only been investigated as a predictor of positive WOMC.

One possible motivation among consumers, in general, to spread negative WOMC is consistent with the notion of helping other consumers (which is behavior often associated with mavens), while others are not. Four primary motivations for spreading negative WOMC include: 1) altruism (to help ensure that others do not get burned); 2) anxiety-reduction (telling someone else about a negative experience allows one to air grievances and to validate one's reaction as reasonable and appropriate); 3) advice-seeking (where one person has a negative experience and seeks the aid of another to help in deciding how to respond); 4) vengeance (wanting to get back at a company) (Sundaram et al., 1998).

A conceptual, two-step flow model of marketing communications involving market mavens is relevant to the current investigation (Geissler and Edison, 2005). The model describes how marketing communications concerning marketing mix variables are received by market mavens who then disseminate that information to other consumers. However, the model does not specify whether the marketplace information is positive or negative or both.

Traditionally, mavens have primarily influenced family, friends, and neighbors. Today, the model suggests that mavens' influence may extend well beyond acquaintances and to a much larger number of consumers through the use of new technology to communicate marketplace information with others. Although some research indicates that WOMC is still more frequent offline than online (e.g., NOP World Study, 2006), one cannot ignore the growing acceptance of new communications technologies (e.g., the Web) among consumers and the potential damaging, exponential effect of spreading negative WOMC online now and in the future. In fact, Jon Berry, Vice President of NOP World, acknowledged that "technology and the Internet play a significant role in spreading word-of-mouth" (NOP World Study, 2006, p. 1).

The model posits that market mavens have an affinity for technology and are more likely than non-mavens to provide information not only about low-tech, low-involvement products (which have been the focus of previous maven research), but also about technology-intensive, high-involvement product categories. Also, mavens are more

likely than non-mavens to use new technology as another way to communicate with other consumers about a broad range of products.

Mavens can use technology in many ways to communicate with other consumers, such as via e-mail, chat rooms, blogs, text messaging, and social networks (e.g., MySpace and YouTube). Numerous Web sites allow consumers to rate and comment on companies, products, and services. Examples include eBay which allows buyers and sellers to rate one another and post short comments following transactions. Epinions.com encourages consumer ratings of brick-and-mortar businesses. Moviefone.com includes not only professional reviews of new movies, but also solicits and presents consumer feedback (Dellarocas, 2003). Research has revealed that consumers read online articulations mainly to save decision-making time and to make better buying decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2003).

In addition, “corporate complaint WWW sites” have sprung up throughout the Internet, allowing consumers to voice their dissatisfaction with a company to many others. One study found that when consumers were aware of these Web sites, they were likely to visit them (Bailey, 2004). Constructing a Web site to disseminate negative WOMC seems to help consumers demonstrate their power to influence others and to gain revenge (Ward and Ostrom, 2006). The nature of such findings and their relevance to the market maven concept provided the impetus for the current investigation.

METHODOLOGY

An in-person survey was conducted among a sample of 151 professionals. The respondents were attending an off-campus, school-hosted event. The respondents were screened to ensure that they were employed and at least 18 years of age. In terms of gender, the sample was comprised of 99 females and 52 males. As an incentive to complete the survey, respondents were offered a free jump drive.

The survey instrument was primarily designed to measure mavens’ propensity to spread both positive and negative WOMC about the marketplace, as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix). Four sets of measures were used to create indexes covering a variety of products with which the sample should be familiar. There are two measures for positive WOMC, and two for negative WOMC. The first of the two in both sets measures the frequency (FR) that the respondent would say something positive or negative (POSWOMFR, NEGWOMFR) about a product or service. A seven-point scale was used where 1 = never and 7 = always. The second set measures the number (NM) of people that the respondent would tell (POSWOMNM, NEGWOMNM). The sum of each frequency measure was multiplied by the corresponding sum of the number of people to be told to create two indexes: POSWOMX and NEGWOMX.

DATA ANALYSIS

In a similar vein as the seminal research on mavens (Feick and Price, 1987), we used the mavenism scores to distinguish mavens from non-mavens. Roughly one-third of the sample scored significantly higher (as determined by a simple t-test comparing means) on the mavenism scale and was considered to be mavens. Another third scored lowest on the mavenism scale and was classified as non-mavens.

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was run on the key indexes. This analysis was used to determine significant differences in the dissemination of positive and negative marketplace information between mavens and non-mavens. In addition, Pearson product moment coefficients of correlations were used to examine the degree of association among the indexes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The frequency of disseminating positive (POSWOMFR) and negative (NEGWOMFR) marketplace information is significantly correlated ($r = .609$, $p < .0001$, $n = 151$). That is, respondents' propensity to make negative comments about products or services highly correlates with their propensity to make positive remarks. A strong association ($r = .774$, $p < .0001$, $n = 151$) is also evident between the number of people that respondents would tell negative marketplace information and opinions (NEGWOMNM) and the number of people to whom they would convey positive information and opinions (POSWOMNM). These findings are consistent with previous research, albeit limited, suggesting that both mavens and non-mavens provide positive and negative information to other consumers.

A MANOVA was run on the key indexes further reveal significant differences ($p < .05$) between mavens and non-mavens with regard to the frequency of both positive and negative WOMC and to the number of people told, as indicated in Table 2 (Appendix). Thus, the research findings support the notion that mavens disseminate both positive and negative marketplace information and do so more frequently than non-mavens. Mavens also pass along this information to more people than do non-mavens.

This study also contributes to a better understanding of mavens by identifying several, previously unexamined characteristics. Prior research has focused on mavens' helpful nature and provision of marketplace information to others. This study confirms that mavens tend to be more helpful to fellow consumers than non-mavens ($r = .453$, $p < .0001$, $n = 151$). Also, mavens are asked for information significantly more often than non-mavens ($r = .338$, $p < .0001$, $n = 151$). This provides additional support for the notion that other consumers seek and value mavens' opinions. And, mavens tend to be variety seekers (i.e., they like new and different styles, like to try new things, and are open-minded) more than non-mavens ($r = .480$, $p < .0001$, $n = 151$). In a similar vein, mavens seem to be more willing to take risks than non-mavens ($r = .262$, $p < .0001$, $n = 151$). Somewhat surprisingly, mavens tend to be more individualistic and less likely to be communal followers than non-mavens ($r = -.189$, $p < .02$, $n = 151$). Thus, it appears that their helpful behavior and self-perceived expertise may be more of a manifestation and reinforcement of their self-concept than an indication that they are more altruistic than other consumers. That is, mavens seem to also benefit from helping other consumers.

Another key contribution of this study is that it extends the two-step flow model of marketing communications to a multi-step flow, as shown in Figure 1 (Appendix). The new model incorporates the idea that mavens disseminate both positive and negative marketplace information to other consumers about various companies, products, and services, ranging from low-tech, low-involvement to high-tech, high-involvement. Mavens use a wide variety of low-tech and high-tech means to communicate with other consumers. The fact that the recipients of this marketplace information likely tell others

using similar means demonstrates the exponential and potentially devastating effects on firms of mavens using new technology to express negative WOMC. In essence, negative WOMC can now spread like wildfire, fueled by influential mavens and fanned by the latest technology.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Advances in technology are ushering in a new age of WOMC. Market mavens who have an affinity for technology are poised to play an increasingly influential role by disseminating marketplace information and opinions to greater numbers of fellow consumers. From the firm's perspective, mavens' net influence can be positive or negative. Mavens' potential to rapidly and exponentially spread negative WOMC to many other consumers should be a major concern for today's marketers. This threat can be battled on two fronts by: 1) quickly addressing any negative consumer concerns; 2) proactively disseminating positive WOMC to mavens and other consumers. That is, a critically important marketing task is to stop the spread of negative WOMC or, better yet, prevent it from occurring.

Many companies simply do not do a good job of providing responsive and engaging outlets for consumers to complain. While no legitimate complaints and questions should be allowed to go unanswered, marketers need to pay particularly close attention to mavens' concerns. Given their marketplace influence, mavens often provide an early indicator of what other consumers are or will be thinking.

By maintaining open and honest communication with mavens and other consumers both online and offline, companies have a golden opportunity to squash the growth of negative WOMC at its onset. Firms also have a chance to turn a loss into an asset. The key is to view complaints as opportunities more than as problems. Company personnel should clearly communicate that they care enough about their customers to address specific complaints and concerns. Some of these former detractors may become the firm's biggest advocates, spreading positive WOMC to many other consumers.

Finally, marketers should be proactive in finding ways to identify and reach mavens. Then, communicating an appropriate, targeted message via various media should help to generate positive WOMC. Along with traditional methods of communicating with target consumers (e.g., direct mail, television, radio, billboards), marketers can now use technology to employ innovative communication techniques, such as viral marketing programs. Viral marketing, which is currently unregulated, could be used to encourage mavens (and other consumers) to pass along a marketing message to other potential consumers. For example, Hotmail offered free e-mail accounts. Subscribers then effectively advertised Hotmail to the people to whom they sent e-mail messages, because each message included the following tag at the bottom: "Get your free private e-mail at <http://www.hotmail.com>."

FUTURE RESEARCH

A future addition to the proposed multi-step communications flow model would be to include a feedback mechanism. The present model emphasizes a directed flow of communication from mavens to other consumers, which is much more common than

mavens communicating with companies. However, the interactive nature of the Web should facilitate more feedback in the future. Thus, another stream of research could examine ways for firms to encourage more feedback from mavens. Such an effort should provide valuable information and suggestions to marketers, and ultimately should help stop the spread of negative WOMC by mavens or prevent it from occurring at all.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
Scale Items for Positive and Negative WOMC Measures

Positive WOMC Scale Items:

While eating out with a friend, the waitperson was better than usual. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
The electronic “gadget” you bought last year has been working very well. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
The movie that you watched at the theater last week was very entertaining. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
Your new car is getting even better gas mileage than the maker promised. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
After many washings, the sweater you bought looks as good as new. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
The luggage that you bought last year looks like new. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
The new jacket you bought last week was a good buy. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
You find a novel by a new author very interesting. a. How often would you tell people about the author or the book? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?

Negative WOMC Scale Items:

While eating out with a friend, the waitperson was rude and incompetent! a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
After the warranty for the electronic “gadget” you bought last year expired, the device quit working. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
The movie that you watched at the theater last week was disappointing. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
Your new car is not getting the gas mileage that the maker promised. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?

After one washing, the sweater you bought is now too small to wear. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
The luggage that you bought last year is falling apart. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
The zipper broke on the new jacket you bought last year. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?
The new novel by a well-published author doesn't seem to you to be as interesting as previous books by that author. a. How often would you tell people about the product? b. Approximately how many people would you tell?

J B

S B

Table 2
MANOVA for Key Indexes – Mavens vs. Non-mavens

Index	Mean Non-Maven (n = 53)	Mean Maven (n = 49)	Significance
POSWOMX	518.00	752.29	.014
NEGWOMX	683.06	927.61	.018
POSWOMFR	25.83	30.80	.004
POSWOMNM	17.60	23.27	.004
NEGWOMFR	30.51	34.68	.017
NEGWOMNM	20.57	25.71	.012

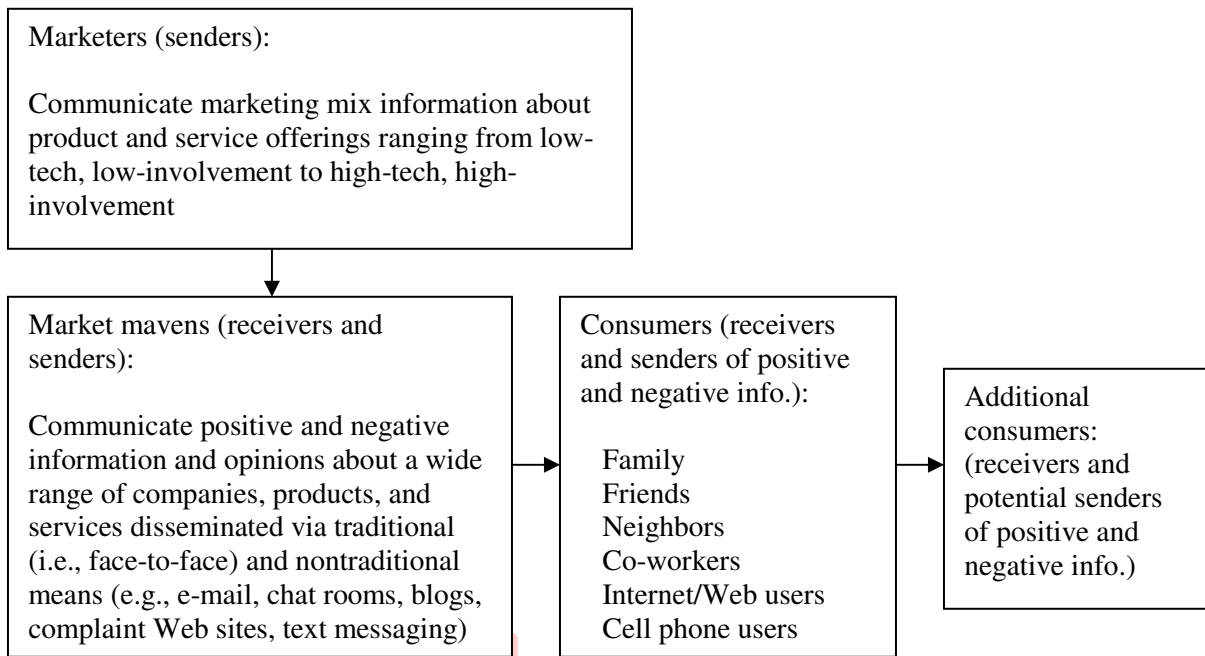


Figure 1
Multi-Step Flow Model of Positive and Negative Marketing Communications