

WHITE PAPER

Understanding Influence, and Making It Work For You: A CNET Networks Study

INTRODUCTION

In today's highly fragmented media landscape, word of mouth has become a very important tool for marketers. Traditional marketing methods simply don't reach their target audiences with the same effectiveness as they did just a decade ago. On the other hand, the recent surge in social networking has drawn attention to "buzz" or "viral" marketing. There are many opinions about how to identify influential individuals and connect with them in ways that encourage this type of message movement, but little hard data exists.

The best-seller lists are filled with books about the major theoretical frameworks of influence: Keller and Berry's "[The Influentials](#)," Gladwell's "[The Tipping Point](#)," and Barabási's "[Linked](#)," to name a few. The concept of networks as outlined in these books diverges widely, from "powerful few" models in which a small proportion (roughly 1 in 10) of highly-connected individuals have all the influence, to multi-segmented models where a variety of actors have a role, to broader models of social networks that assume everyone is important.

Conventional wisdom holds that influence is not widespread, but is the domain of a few high-profile individuals who have a deep expertise in certain subject matters and advise the rest of the public on matters of choice. They are further assumed to be highly connected, with very large networks of people to whom they can impart their knowledge. This notion has informally shaped media and marketing models in which influence is visually depicted as a pyramid, with a few highly influential individuals concentrated over a mass of others who consume but do not advise. This pyramid-shaped model has been widely adopted; marketers and public relations professionals spend a lot of resources and energy focusing on the elite few at the top, while the bulk of the population gets just a logo and a jingle. But is this model correct? The implications of this question for effective marketing and media efforts are profound.

Because shedding light on these fundamental issues can be transformational for media companies and marketers alike, CNET Networks™ conducted a comprehensive study across many different audiences, using a variety of research methods.

Methodology

A three-part design was employed for this study. Part 1 consisted of quantitative research. A survey instrument was designed to provide directional insight into the nature of social networks, communications, and influence, and the role played by specific sites in informing and enabling that activity. This survey was fielded to members of selected CNET Networks websites and a control group. Part 2 of the research consisted of qualitative research. Two waves of in-depth interviews were conducted with people reporting moderate to large networks who actively give advice. The interviews were designed to elicit a deeper understanding of personal motivations for influence. The role of media was also explored. Part 3 consisted of a behavioral analysis of site usage. Members of CNET Networks sites taking the quantitative survey in Part 1 were tracked on subsequent visits to CNET Networks sites. The actual media-use trends were analyzed in aggregate and mapped back to personal network size as reported in the survey.

For greater detail, please see the Methodology Statement in the Appendix.

FINDINGS

Network Structure

To answer questions about whether there are many or few who are highly influential, the survey looked for insights into the essential ingredient of influence: personal network size and structure. Survey participants were asked to describe the number of people they interact with on a monthly basis and categorize them into the following groups:

- family members
- close friends
- casual friends
- co-workers
- civic or religious groups

The research finds that the size of one's personal network can vary widely, as shown in Figure 1. Some people are less connected, with 10 or fewer people in their network. Some are moderately connected, communicating with 11 to 99 people on a monthly basis. And some are highly connected, communicating with more than 100 people each month – including some individuals with over a thousand people in their personal network.

The study finds a high degree of correlation between self-reported influence activity and network size. Less than half of those who are less connected (10 or fewer connections) stated that others “ask my opinion and often follow my advice,” compared to more than 75% of highly connected people (with 100+ connections).

FIGURE 1

Mean # of people they stay in contact with monthly by relationship:	Less Connected 10 or Fewer Connections	Moderately Connected 11 to 99 Connections	Highly Connected 100+ Connections
Close personal friends	2	8	24
Casual friends	2	10	41
Neighbors	1	3	10
Adult family members	2	6	16
Co-workers, employees, work supervisors or clients	2	11	60
Church and civic organization members	1	4	32
Total	10	42	183

The research supports the notion of a “Weak Link” effect: as personal networks grow, the proportion of informal members shows the greatest increase. This improves the leverage of connection downstream, since weak links are often the connecting nodes between different network clusters. In other words, it is the casual friend who acts as a pollinator, carrying buzz from one group of close friends to a separate group of close friends.

The study also reveals the importance of technology in making personal networks possible. As Figure 2 illustrates, the research shows that the larger the network, the greater the role of technology in staying connected. Technology enables the maintenance and frequency of connections; obviously, it's easier to e-mail 30 people about something than call them all individually. Thus, we see highly-connected people making greater use of technology like e-mail, instant messaging and text messaging to stay in touch.

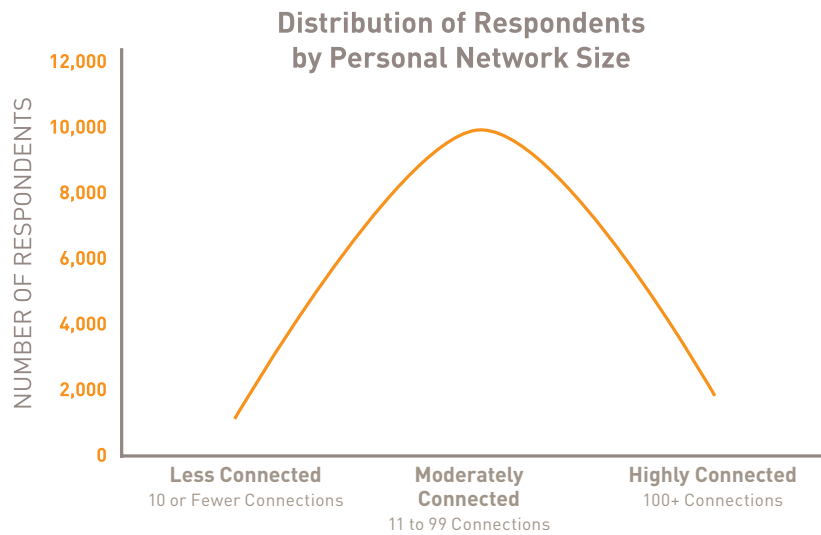
FIGURE 2

Mean # of people in their network they communicate with monthly by each method:	Less Connected 10 or Fewer Connections	Moderately Connected 11 to 99 Connections	Highly Connected 100+ Connections
E-mail	5	21	84
See in person	4	20	88
Talk on the phone	4	14	46
Instant message	1	5	16
Text message	1	4	15

THE SHAPE OF INFLUENCE: DIAMOND VS. PYRAMID

In terms of influence, network distribution is of equal importance to how networks are organized. The study finds that network size follows a power distribution, because there tends to be a long tail of social network size. However, there is a tremendous central tendency which is lost in a power transformation. Most individuals map neatly to a normal distribution with symmetry about the mean (see Figure 3). There are not two groups of people in two distinct populations; rather, most people are within a tightly defined range around the average. This data suggests that the 1-to-10 or pyramid model, where influence comes from a few highly-connected people who advise the unconnected masses, is inaccurate, and points instead to the significant potential of the moderately-connected majority.

FIGURE 3



So, the true shape of influence may be better characterized as a diamond, not a pyramid. Focusing only on the highly-connected few misses a huge opportunity to communicate on a large scale with the bulk of the population.

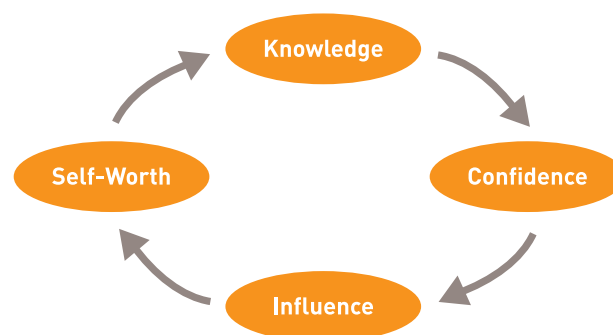
FIGURE 4



The Dynamics of Influence

Along with insights into the structure of networks, the study reveals some surprising discoveries about what powers them. Conventional wisdom holds that the highly influential few are topic experts, and share their deep expertise with the masses in part to demonstrate their knowledge. However, our research finds that **influencers are primarily motivated by a desire to help others**. People like to be needed and valued, and influencers derive a sense of self-worth and validation from giving good advice. They aren't simply blasting e-mails to their entire address book – these influencers are taking the time to seek out and customize information they believe will be relevant to specific individuals within their network. And when their advice is well received, it gives them the confidence to continue and expand their efforts (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5



The study finds that there is a relationship between the growth of a person's network and the frequency with which they are asked for advice (see Figure 6). When people are rewarded for their good advice, they are motivated to become more skillful at seeking out relevant information – and as they become increasingly well-known as the person to go to for answers, their network grows accordingly. This notion of influence brokering as a dynamic process helps explain how networks develop and expand.

FIGURE 6

		Less Connected 10 or Fewer Connections	Moderately Connected 11 to 99 Connections	Highly Connected 100+ Connections
PUSH	“Love to tell people about something new I’ve learned”	58%	72%	76%
PULL	“People ask my opinion and often follow my advice”	48%	63%	75%

ONE PERSON, MANY INTERESTS

Another perception challenged by the research is that a person is influential in only one area of interest or knowledge. When asked about 20 different topics, the study’s respondents declared an average of 10-12 areas of interest, regardless of the size of their network (as shown in Figure 7). So, to assume that a person who visits a technology site only cares about technology-related messages fails to take advantage of a dozen other opportunities for communication.

FIGURE 7

	Less Connected 10 or Fewer Connections	Moderately Connected 11 to 99 Connections	Highly Connected 100+ Connections
Mean # of Topics of Interest	10	11	12
TOPICS			
Athletics/Active Sports	Electronics	Outdoor Sports	Travel
Cars & Auto Trends	Pop Culture	Pro/College Sports	TV & Film
Clothes & Fashion	Exercise/Fitness	Restaurants	Video Gaming
Clubs, Bars, Nightlife	Money & Investing	Sports Nutrition	Wellness/Healthy Living
Cooking	Music	Tech/CE	Wine, Beer, Liquor

SLEUTHING OUT SHARE-WORTHY INFORMATION

In addition to the personal rewards they get from providing good information, the study finds that influencers also enjoy the process of discovery – **the thrill of the hunt**. The CNET Networks user is inquisitive and discerning, a personality type the study identifies as “The Sleuth.” These users:

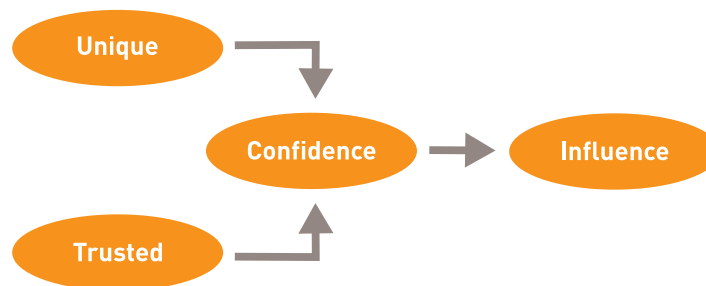
- aren’t experts, but are savvy at finding credible information
- watch and read media with a critical eye
- rely on the web to find and distribute information
- tend to send information only to individuals they know will be interested
- won’t send information unless they’re confident it’s worth sharing

“I know it’s out there. I know the information is out there. And it becomes this quest, almost, to figure out exactly where it is and find it for them.”

– CNET member

The study reveals that for information to be considered valuable, it must be both **unique** and **trusted**. For example, an AP headline might be trustworthy, but it isn’t unique – one can find it in dozens of places. And information on an amateur fan site might be highly unique, but not necessarily trustworthy. Sources that provide unique **and** trusted information will be referred to again and again (see Figure 8). Also, because Sleuths and other influencers rely so heavily on technology, information that is provided in easily shareable electronic formats is much more likely to be forwarded.

FIGURE 8



So, while influencers are not necessarily experts, they do get validation from giving good advice. They are tech-savvy, have a wide range of interests, and are highly selective about where they get their information and what they choose to share.

“If someone asks me for advice, they trust me. They believe in me. It means my word means something.”

– GameSpot member

Influencers also tend to be active contributors to their online communities. As Figure 9 shows, there is a strong correlation between CNET Network users’ level of connection and the frequency with which they contribute content such as forum posts or product reviews. More connected users are also more likely to create tags to assign information to a particular category of interest (see Figure 10).

FIGURE 9

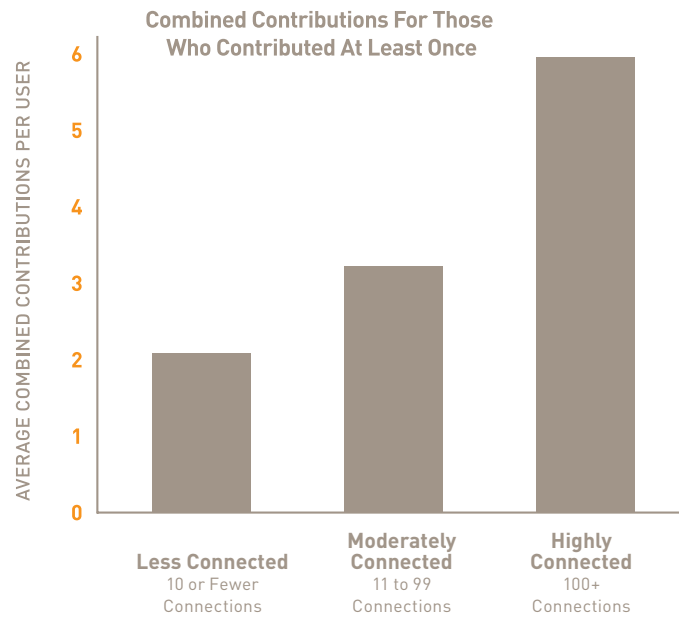
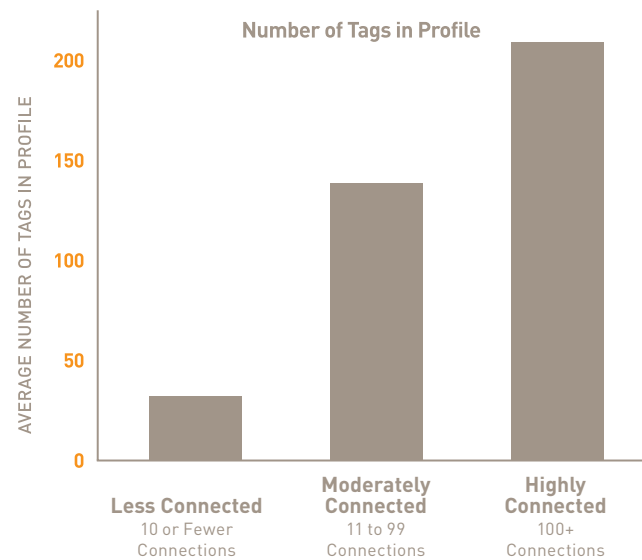


FIGURE 10



The CNET Networks audience is ideally positioned to drive influence because they:

- have an average personal network of 60 people
- are asked advice on multiple topics (an average of 10 topics out of 20)
- value the content of CNET Networks' sites as unique and trustworthy
- display a high level of engagement with the content

CONCLUSION

While there is no broad consensus on the subject, the most commonly accepted notion has been that influence comes from an elite few. Countless hours and dollars have been spent trying to reach the all-powerful group at the top of the pyramid. However, the results of our study directly challenge this model. Influence is not, in fact, exclusive, but is something we all share. Influence is not a function of charisma so much as it's a function of human nature – people are alike in more ways than they differ.

This theme of commonality shows up in the research again and again. The study of network structure reveals that networks approximate a bell curve in the range of sizes, with the vast majority of people being moderately connected. This suggests a large disconnect between assumptions about the social utility of the majority – common media and marketing models underestimate the great potential in most consumers. The study of network dynamics finds that nearly everyone, regardless of their level of connection, is interested in about the same number of topics; that influence is motivated by our basic human need to be helpful by giving good advice; and that people share a common enjoyment in seeking out valuable information.

The study also finds that influencers tend to pass along information they consider both unique and trusted. A site that can be relied on for this type of information has enormous potential to drive influence. This insight offers some clues into how influence can be activated and where consumers can be found.

So, influence isn't about reaching those rare individuals at the top of the pyramid. It's not about targeting people at all...it's about targeting the places influential people go and catering to the information and community needs they have.

Applying These Insights to Advertising

As previously mentioned, the most widely accepted marketing model in past years has been pyramid-shaped, with influence flowing from the top down. However, the study indicates that a diamond-shaped model is more accurate. Instead of focusing primarily on the top tier, more marketing messages and dollars should be directed towards the untapped “center of the diamond.” This would involve:

- considering the emotional and informational needs of the moderately-connected majority
- packaging creative in a way that makes it easy to forward and share
- combining PR and advertising strategies to create exclusivity and trust
- choosing trusted and unique environments in which to present your message

APPENDIX

Methodology Statement

PART 1: QUANTITATIVE SURVEY METHOD

A survey instrument was designed by Reality Check Research LLC to investigate the information habits and the size and nature of the social networks of users familiar with CNET Networks sites. Participants were sent an e-mail solicitation and offered an opportunity to win a gift certificate for completing a secure, online survey. The survey was designed to take less than 20 minutes to complete.

Sample

To meet the study objective of providing directional insight into the nature of social networks, communications, and influence, and the role played by specific sites in informing and enabling that activity, the sample populations for the CNET Networks brands were identified to meet the following criteria:

- had taken an action to indicate they wanted to receive information from the brand
- had visited the brand in the last 120 days and had valid web cookie data for their visit (in order to do site behavior analysis described in Part 3)

CNET Networks sites included:

- CNET.com® (shopping section users)
- GameSpot®
- TV.com™
- Webshots® (travel section users)
- BNET™
- TechRepublic®
- ZDNet® (enterprise technology section users)

A comparison group was created by Reality Check LLC and obtained from GMI Inc. To be qualified for inclusion in this group, the respondent:

- had to be 13 years of age or older
- had to be a user of at least one of the large volume portals
- answered yes to the specific question “Do you ever use any of the following websites to access information and online activities?” (MSN®, AOL®, Yahoo!®, and Google™)
- had to say that they use these sites to access at least one of the following: gaming information, consumer electronics or technology news and information, TV information, or photos
- if included in the control sample, could not be a member of CNET.com, GameSpot, TV.com, or Webshots

Note that there is no behavioral data available for the control group. The comparison group differs from the CNET Networks group by their admission that they are not a member of a CNET Networks brand and, further, that they use web portal brands such as MSN, Yahoo!, and AOL to get information about topics covered by the CNET Networks brands.

Timing

The survey was fielded from October 24, 2006 through January 19, 2007, with each group having at least 650 respondents as shown in Table 1.

Data Collection

The online survey instrument provides sufficient quantitative data to make comparisons within and across groups of people. The target of approximately 1000 respondents provides a margin of error that is less than 5 percent. Gathering data on this scale introduces opportunities for

selection bias. While self-selection bias is inherent in all online survey methodologies and is believed to be more severe in e-mail solicitation, the need to demonstrate experience with the brand in question as well as provide site behavior data favored the use of e-mail solicitation.

TABLE 1

Group	Respondents
BNET	663
CNET.com	1194
GameSpot	1527
TechRepublic	2513
TV.com	1362
Webshots	1807
ZDNet	2725
Comparison	1002
Total	12,793

PART 2: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

After completion of the survey, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted by trained interviewers from Reality Check LLC with a small sample of “influencers” identified by re-contacting survey respondents who ranked in the top third of self-identified scores of influence. The primary goal of the interviews was to understand the emotional drivers/motivations of influencers. To do this, interviewers employed the psychoanalytic technique of **storytelling**. Respondents were asked to share a story about a recent referral or recommendation they had made. Once the memories of this moment of influence were retrieved, interviewers focused the discussion on the thoughts and feelings the influence experience evoked for the respondent. If necessary, interviewers referred respondents to a word list consisting of descriptors of various emotions.

The sample consisted of the following numbers of users from each of these brands:

CNET.com – 5

GameSpot – 5

Webshots – 4

TV.com – 4

Comparison group – 5

The interviews were conducted in November and December 2006. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes in length, and was recorded for further analysis.

A second wave of in-depth interviews was conducted in January 2007. Eighteen interviews were conducted with users of CNET Networks sites with moderate to large networks who actively provide advice. These sessions were recorded on video.

PART 3: SITE BEHAVIOR DATA

Survey respondents from all but the comparison group could be investigated for site usage patterns, as their e-mail address or their encrypted global ID was stored with the survey results. This allowed the survey data to be joined back to activity data. Site behavior was analyzed in aggregate, and comparisons were made based on network size as reported in the survey.

While many site activities are available for analysis from each brand that was included, this paper uses examples of TechRepublic user behavior for illustrative purposes. Site behavior data was available from 77% of the TechRepublic survey respondents.

The analysis focused on two classes of site behaviors:

- Contributing content to CNET Networks sites. Opportunities to participate vary by site, but include posting comments in forums, voting in polls, and reviewing products.
- Creating tags. Tags serve a dual purpose – they allow users to designate categories of interest in the content with which they interact, and they help users communicate their interests on their profile pages.

Brand	Surveys Complete	69 Day Returns	Survey Returns
TechRepublic	2,248	1,733	77.09%

About CNET Networks, Inc.

CNET Networks, Inc. (Nasdaq: CNET – <http://www.cnetnetworks.com>) is an interactive media company that builds brands for people and the things they are passionate about, such as gaming, music, entertainment, technology, business, food, and parenting. The Company’s leading brands include CNET, GameSpot, TV.com, MP3.com, Webshots, CHOW, UrbanBaby, ZDNet, BNET, and TechRepublic. Founded in 1992, CNET Networks has a strong presence in the US, Asia, and Europe.

For more information about CNET Networks and this research, go to www.cnetnetworks.com/researchinsight.

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