

The New Persuaders: the changing nature of influence

Methodology

- Opinion Leader Research manages the Opinion Leader Panel, an omnibus survey of movers and shakers drawn from different spheres of influence. Between 10th and 17th February 2003 we interviewed 106 opinion leaders from business, government, media, the City and think tanks
- Opinion Leader Research embarked upon a literature review looking at the topic of influence. This encompassed research papers, text books and journalistic think pieces on the topic of influence

Overview

- Influence has changed dramatically. Politics, big business, the media and religion no longer possess the power to influence public opinion in the manner that they once did
- The public has become savvy at decoding marketing messages. Today organisations who use marketing communications need to find new methods of getting their message across
- The general public is still interested in politics, business, the media and religion. However the public is far more likely to debate and scrutinise messages delivered by these organisations
- Effective information is far more likely to be delivered to the general public through a network of friends and acquaintances

This 'information network' operates through the relationship of two personality types

- Protagonists are highly influential members of the public, they have large networks of friends and acquaintances and are very persuasive

- Perceivers are more likely to listen and be informed by protagonists and may wish to act upon the information received
- For an organisation to successfully communicate it must influence protagonists, they are the people who will ensure that information is circulated amongst the wider communities
- The public rely upon protagonists within their peer group(s) to provide reliable information and to influence their opinions
- Members of the public are better at communicating with each other. They no longer trust the media to provide them with the facts, they now seek influence from protagonists to keep them informed

Introduction

**“What we've got here is a failure to communicate”
– from the film *Cool Hand Luke***

Over the last few years the nature of influence has changed dramatically. Influence was once considered hierarchical, the dominant influence model relied on authority having the communicative power to sway the public. Either through mass advertising, social tradition or through institutions, those in authority have enjoyed a certain amount of influence over public opinion. Historical reasons for this are many. Ranging from a general culture of deference through to a lack of information, the general public has often relied on influential bodies or figures to shape their opinion. However research conducted by Opinion Leader Research suggests that this culture of deference has changed. Influence has become democratised.



Although there is awareness amongst those in authority that the nature of influence has changed, there is a sense of bewilderment about the exact nature of this change. How has this change occurred? What is the impact of this change? Who are the new holders of influence?

Attitudes to authority

Politics, big business, the media and religion have suffered a decrease in their ability to influence the general public. Research has shown that public attitudes towards these bodies of authority have altered over the last few years.

Part of this decrease in influence is due to a rise in mistrust. Trust is an integral element of influence; people need to feel that they trust an information provider before they accept the information offered.

Opinion Leader Research has conducted research looking into changing attitudes to trust¹. In our study, the public chose alternative figures to trust. Our research found that the public preferred information from people not sanctioned by authority. Those without a 'vested interest' were sought after as information providers.

Of course, for an organisation to be successful, effective communication both internally and externally is vital. Official government statistics show that there is a growth in media consumption, this suggests that above all else the desire for information has risen within society. Yet perversely big business, government, traditional media and religious organisations are finding it hard to communicate convincingly with the general public. Why has this happened? One reason for the inability of these organisations to communicate effectively stems from the growth in mass communication.

Communication channels

There has been an overall expansion in mass media communications. The popularity of the internet, mobile telecommunications and the expansion of TV and radio stations has increased the amount of information available to the public.



This increase in channels has encouraged the general public to produce their own media content. There has been a proliferation of micro-media from weblogs, chat rooms, text messaging and email. The increase in the general public's media and medium usage

Internet consumption

In 2003 the ONS revealed that

- in September 2002 46% of households had internet access, this figure has increased from 39% during September 2001

Interestingly,

- during 2002 62% of the population used the internet at sometime during the year

From the 62% who had used the internet

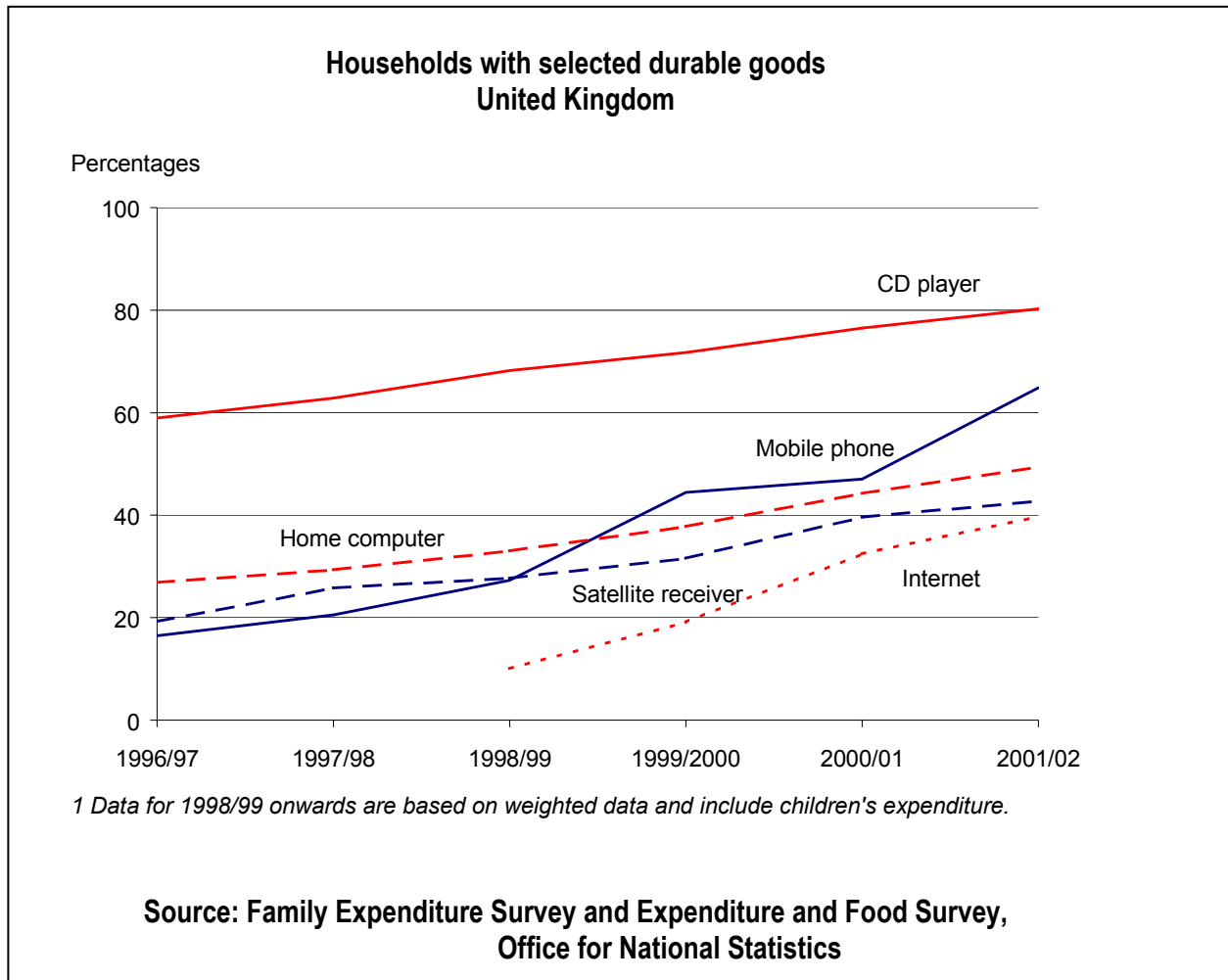
- 76% had used it for email
- whilst 71 % had used the internet to find information about goods and services

In 2002 11% of mobile phone used their phone to access the internet

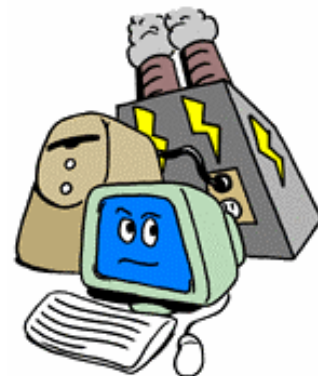
¹ The Rebuilding Trust report is available at www.opinionleader.co.uk/download/RebuildingTrustReport.pdf

testifies to the fact that more people wish to access more information and also wish to communicate.

The amount of information offered to the public has led to terms such as 'data smog' and 'information overload.' These labels describe the sense of being overwhelmed by information. Such terms also indicate another effect of this growth in communication, the need for a trusted person to navigate.



This graph shows how UK households have increased ownership of media and communication devices since 1996 until 1997.



Communication breakdown: the impact of the growth in communication channels

“A weekday edition of a newspaper contains as much information as the average person in the 17th century would be exposed to in their entire lifetime”

The Guardian Newspaper

The increase in communication has led to an increase in opinion, news and scrutiny. Nowadays organisations are subjected to a general sense of mistrust. This feeling has been brought on by a variety of different reasons.

Over the last few years, organised religion, big business and politicians have found it hard to avoid the fallout caused by a number of scandals.

- Big business has been tainted by financial scandals
- Politics has been tainted by a general mistrust that can be attributable to spin
- Organised religion, particularly the Catholic church, has been tarnished by child abuse scandals



Furthermore,

- Media objectivity has been challenged by a proliferation of ‘media voices.’ These many ‘voices’ present an array of opinions, that make the public aware that there are other perspectives to take into account

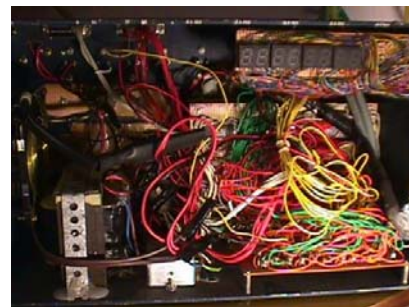
That said, the media is still able to influence, but the information it provides is subject to scrutiny and suspicion.

Our opinion leader survey found that

- 81% of opinion leaders believe that it is the media, not politicians, who influence public opinion

Furthermore,

- 74% of opinion leaders believe that managing media stories is essential for political parties to become influential



Opinion leaders believe that influencing the media is of paramount importance when attempting to shape public opinion.

Social capital: meeting, greeting and talking together

Social trends have changed over the last few years. There has been a shift in behaviour; people within society are socialising more. Research evidence suggests that friendship networks, club membership and socialising in general is increasing. The drive to communicate with each other is strong.

The Office of National Statistics states:

“In general, average membership levels among most kinds of voluntary organisations have risen...Some types of voluntary organisations, such as environmental organisations, have experienced very high levels of growth in membership.”²



As communication culture has increased, so has communication amongst individuals through peer groups and social networks. Influence is now more likely to happen through social interaction. These friendship networks are where public influence appears

- 64% of opinion leaders believe that the influence held by traditional authority figures has waned, nowadays friends and acquaintances are more likely to influence opinion

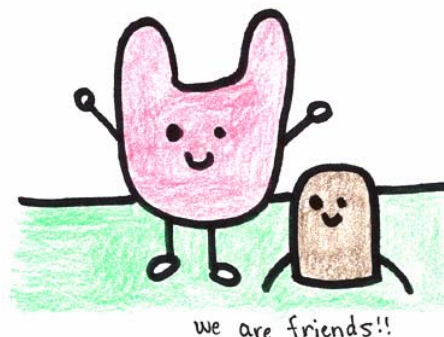
Friends and acquaintances are the people who pass information on. They are often the beginning of a message chain that skilfully disseminates messages throughout communities. The increase in social networks indicates that people are going out and meeting others. The group setting is fertile ground for information to be spread. Group membership and social networks are partly responsible for the viral-like spread of information. Group members will often be part of other social networks and groups, subsequently information can be spread a long way. Influence over opinions is exercised within groups by peers and ‘informal group leaders.’

People Power

Who is trusted enough to be influential?

People want to get information from trusted sources. Close friends and family are trusted providers of information, but equally so are loose friends and acquaintances. Our findings show that the people will seek out the ‘expert’ within their peer group and select them to provide information.

There is a symbiotic relationship between information providers and those seeking information. From our analysis we have spotted distinct tendencies between these two types of people. We call these people protagonists and perceivers.



² Quote taken from The Office of National Statistics Social Trends Report 2003 edition

One to one: protagonists and perceivers

From our research we have found that influence now revolves around the interactions of two personality types. We found that protagonists and perceivers are the types of people who interact with each other to affect change. We believe that this relationship between the two exists within all walks of society.

Protagonists are:

- skilled friendship makers, they know a wide variety of people, which means that they stay in contact with a large amount of friends and acquaintances
- skilled at maintaining their friends and acquaintances
- persuasive people, skilled at encouraging others to adopt their point of view
- good information gatherers, protagonists are skilled at absorbing and finding information and news
- they are not always the most popular people, but they are always well respected



Whilst perceivers,

- are the numerical majority in a group and in society
- are more likely to listen to the ideas of others
- hold on to positive or negative opinions for longer periods of time
- can be more insular and focus on personal issues and aspirations
- can make an idea become more powerful. They are the ones who zealously pursue a brand or idea and offer critical mass to the advocacy or detraction of said brand or issue

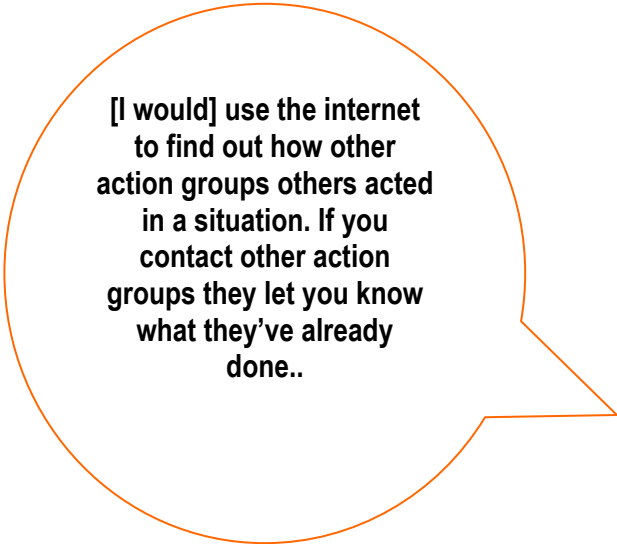


Protagonists and perceivers: the differences

Opinion Leader Research conducted a number of discussion groups looking at the way influence operates within society. We conducted groups talking to protagonists and perceivers. Both protagonists and perceivers reacted differently in certain situations.

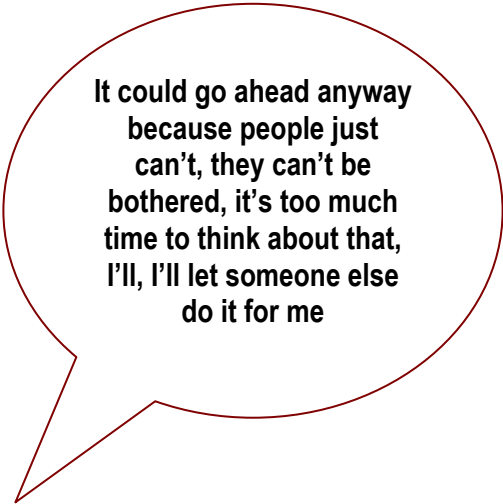
We asked the group what they would do if they found out that an airport was about to be built near their homes. The answers given to this question indicates one of the differences that exist between these two types.

protagonists said...



[I would] use the internet to find out how other action groups others acted in a situation. If you contact other action groups they let you know what they've already done..

perceivers answered...



It could go ahead anyway because people just can't, they can't be bothered, it's too much time to think about that, I'll, I'll let someone else do it for me

Some more differences between protagonists and perceivers...

Protagonists...

- were more likely to think of innovative ways of dealing with problems and finding solutions
- tended towards individualistic modes of action, like solo protests
- are more likely to form connections with outside groups to get ideas and to introduce a wider emphasis to their agenda
- enjoy socialising and are far more willing to go out, entertain friends at home and be part of clubs
- are more ambitious and spoke about working for themselves, rather than working under a boss
- are avid news watchers and media consumers. They are selective about the TV they watch
- like to remain active, they relax through gathering information, engaging in puzzle solving, and ensuring that their minds are active



Perceivers...

- were more likely to use established methods to protest or defer to others for solutions
- join large groups to give a mass to their protest
- would seek advice and information from a smaller range of contacts, often within close proximity of their homes
- are more likely to stay at home, they very rarely entertain and are more inclined to socialise with their immediate family
- are far more likely to seek pleasure from work. Overall they are far more likely to enjoy working for others
- are more likely to be uninterested in the news, however they were more likely to watch far more TV than protagonists
- relax by disengaging from the day. They prefer to relax by 'chilling out', rather than interacting

Affects on organisations

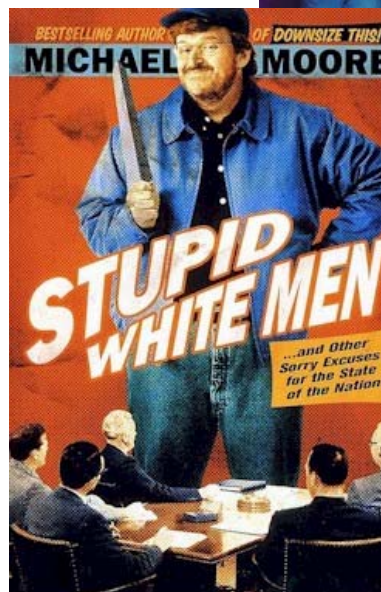
There are many examples in which protagonist and perceiver behaviour has affected organisations over the last few years. The protagonist's ability to become impassioned about an issue and to then be influential enough to infuse a wide variety of people often leads to social activity such as boycotts and direct action stunts.

Protagonists in action

In Germany web designer Christian Stein, emailed friends urging them to send in their shirts to Gerhard Schröder in protest at tax rises. Word spread and the Chancellery in Berlin received up to 1000 shirts per day.³



Librarian Ann Sparanese posted a notice on a message board describing her dismay at Harper Collins' refusal to release filmmaker Michael Moore's latest book 'Stupid White Men'. The publishers cited political reasons for their refusal. Ann Sparanese brought attention to this issue by posting a message on a website. Harper Collins received so many emails from disgruntled librarians that they had to revoke their decision and publish. The book went on to become a best seller.



Rice protests has been another way in which people have sought to have their opinions heard by government. Recently there have been a number of emails circulated, which ask people to send rice to their heads of state to protest against war. The most recent incarnation of this protest originated in Boulder, Colorado.

³ Story recorded in the Daily Telegraph 5/12/02

Benefits for business

Protagonists and perceivers enjoy a symbiotic relationship that is very important for all organisations to understand. As society eschews information from authority in favour of information from a trusted friend, organisations need to understand how the influence held by protagonists affects them. Furthermore, they need to understand how to turn these 'new persuaders' into advocates for their objectives.



Protagonists exist within all walks of life. Organisations have protagonists within their hierarchies, it is important to find out their opinions of these influential people. For organisations it is essential that protagonists are 'on-side' as their persuasive and networking skills mean that they can spread positive or negative messages further than perceivers.

Opinion Leader Research has developed expertise in finding these 'invisible influencers.' We have developed methods that reveal who the protagonists are. We utilise protagonists to provide public and private organisations with research that informs them on the public mood. Protagonists evaluate information and are integral agents in passing on the opinions that spread throughout communities.

As they are vital to any organisation seeking to communicate to the public, it is imperative that their opinions are gathered. Opinion Leader Research has developed an ongoing methodology that monitors the opinions of protagonists. The programme, called The Meeting Place, offers organisations the chance to test ideas, find out what is really going on in the community and also get clues to the future mood of the nation.

About Opinion Leader Research

Opinion Leader Research specialises in consultation and research and has an established reputation for developing innovative research solutions for a global market.

Opinion Leader Research is renowned for its work with opinion leaders drawn from different spheres of influence and manages the Opinion Leader Network – a panel of several hundred key opinion leaders who agree to participate in our projects on a regular basis. We also run a monthly Opinion Leader Omnibus.

Opinion Leader Research is the pioneering force behind the development of a range of new approaches to public consultation and is the acknowledged leader in this field. To date, we have successfully completed numerous Citizens' Juries and Citizens' Forums.

We have also developed an exciting new research programme called The Meeting Place. In this programme we conduct weekly group discussions with protagonists throughout the UK. This allows us to monitor the views, opinions and attitudes of the most influential members of the general public and understand the public's true opinions.

Opinion Leader Research is known for its expertise in policy development and evaluation, working closely with a number of government departments and think tanks to inform the development of effective policy solutions and communications strengths.

For more information on Opinion Leader Briefings, the Opinion Leader Network or any of our other work, please contact Viki Cooke or Deborah Mattinson on +44 (0)20 7861 3080 or by e-mail on vcooke@opinionleader.co.uk. Further information can also be found at www.opinionleader.co.uk