



# Using online opinion leaders to promote the hedonic and utilitarian value of products and services

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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** Research and applied evidence suggest that online opinion leaders are important promoters of products and services. However, managers and firms need to choose which opinion leaders to work with and better understand how to collaborate with those leaders to promote different types of products and services. Online opinion leaders should be used to promote the experiential (hedonic) and functional (utilitarian) value of products and services over different online forums. In this article, we describe how online opinion leaders can serve appeal leadership functions, serve knowledge leadership functions, and take multiple roles (e.g., experts, celebrities, micro-celebrities, micro-influencers, early adopters, market mavens, enthusiasts). We then present a five-stage planning process designed to guide partnerships with online opinion leaders. Specific steps in the process include: planning (setting the objectives of the campaign and the role of online opinion leaders), recognition (identifying influential and relevant online opinion leaders), alignment (matching online opinion leaders and online forums with the products or services promoted), motivation (rewarding online opinion leaders in a way that aligns with their social role), and coordination (negotiating, monitoring, and supporting the influence of the online opinion leaders).

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## 1. Online opinion leaders within social media channels

Social media platforms and websites that enable knowledge transfer through social networks and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) provide opportunities for contemporary marketers and firms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens,

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McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have helped brands like Coke, Dove, GoPro, McDonald's, Samsung Mobile, Nike Football, Oreo, KFC, PlayStation, Converse, and Red Bull market their products more effectively (Lin, Swarna, & Bruning, 2017). However, the mere adoption of social media technology no longer provides the competitive edge that it provided even 5 years ago. Today, everybody is on social media, including competing companies. The question is no longer whether to use social media, but how to best use social media to market brands, products, and services more effectively.

Practical advice for the management of social media marketing campaigns is available to guide the strategic management of social media activities according to specific social media functions (Kietzmann et al., 2011), to guide the integration of social media strategies to reach consumers across platforms (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011), to integrate social media with the overall marketing strategy of a brand or firm (Killian & McManus, 2015), to design a social media (Facebook) page to promote a personal brand (Lin, 2017), and to manage social media brand posts to be more engaging across specific culturally based markets (Lin et al., 2017). While some of these guidelines imply the importance of online opinion leaders within broader social media campaigns, marketers need more specific guidelines on how to partner effectively with online opinion leaders within these broader social media campaigns. In this article, we intend to help marketers leverage the social networks underlying these social media platforms by providing prescriptive advice on how to work with online opinion leaders to promote brands, sell products, and provide services.

Opinion leaders are individuals likely to influence others within their immediate environment that can include one's neighbors, friends, and coworkers, as well as people with broader societal status like celebrities, experts, and other influential members within our online and offline communities. Opinion leaders tend to be better informed than the average person, and in the past were often more exposed to mass media channels (Weimann, 1994). In marketing, the concept of opinion leadership originated from the diffusion of innovations theory, which describes how individuals indirectly alter the attitudes and behaviors of others via social influence (Rogers, 1995). More specifically, they can influence the purchasing decisions of others due to their personal appeal or connection with consumers, as well as their specialized knowledge and/or authority on a given topic. In contemporary markets, these opinion leaders often operate online using social

media forums to influence their followers (Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013; Tsang & Zhou, 2005; Watts, 2007). However, research suggests that consumers respond differently to whether products provide experiential (hedonic) and functional (utilitarian) value (e.g., Im, Bhat, & Lee, 2015; Moore, 2015), implying that this distinction is critical to the effectiveness of online opinion leaders' endorsements for certain products. A typical example of a hedonic product would be a pair of Gucci satin mid-heel knee boots, while a typical example of a utilitarian product would be a pair of ECCO waterproof hiking boots. Herein, we describe how online opinion leaders can promote the hedonic and utilitarian value of products or services by fostering personal attachment and providing useful information. We conclude by outlining some prescriptive guidelines for partnering with online opinion leaders.

## 2. Online opinion leaders' influence on utilitarian and hedonic value

Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have played a critical role in the success of electronic commerce, have changed the way people interact, and have created platforms for online opinion leaders to serve as brand ambassadors and influencers for products and services. These sites provide the opportunity for opinion leaders to interact with their followers and to share information that consumers seek to acquire. Offline opinion leadership and traditional word-of-mouth communications involve face-to-face information exchange between friends, relatives, or acquaintances. In these interactions, the opinion leaders' influence is direct and they are considered as individuals who are highly informed, respected, and socially connected. Online opinion leadership usually involves eWOM in which information and opinions are transmitted through writing, video, pictures, or emotion-laden characters (i.e., emoticons or emojis) over the internet. A result of these more detached and technological forms of eWOM is that online opinion leaders can have more diverse social connections that involve a greater number of what could be weaker relationships. From a marketing perspective, while online opinion leaders might have less influence on any one consumer that they interact with, they are more likely to have a much greater scope of influence, as they can reach thousands or even millions of potential customers.

Online opinion leaders play a pivotal role in marketing communication, as they can provide informal consumption-related advice to others (Tsang & Zhou, 2005; Watts, 2007). Opinion leaders tend to

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