Opinion Leadership, Types, Characteristics and Methods of Measuring Opinion Leadership

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The most important thing for the marketer is to understand about the role of 'opinion leadership' in marketing of goods and services. Opinion leadership which is otherwise known as word-of-mouth communication is an important personal influence on consumers. With the proliferation of cell phone usage and e-mail, many people are always available to friends, family and business associates. Message spreads like virus among people. Opinion leaders offer advice or information about a product, service and how a particular product may be used. Words of mouth take place through personal or face to face communication.

Definition of Opinion Leadership
Opinion leadership is defined as the process in which one person influences the attitudes or actions of other person informally, who may be identified as opinion leader. They offer informal advice about the product or service. Opinion leaders are part of the social groups. They have social communication network. The communication is informal and interpersonal in nature which happens between those who are not associated with the commercial selling source directly.

Examples of Opinion Leadership
The role of opinion leadership could be seen in the following examples.
1. During casual talk, a friend talks about the car he recently bought. He recommends buying it.
2. A person shows a friend photograph of his recent tour abroad. He suggests that by using a particular make of camera, better pictures could be shot.
3. A family wants to have a swimming pool in their spacious house. The family head asks neighbours which pool Construction Company they should call.
4. A parent wants admission for his child in a particular school. He contacts other parents sending their children to the same school.

Characteristics of Opinion Leaders
Opinion leadership is a dynamic process. It is the most powerful consumer force. As informal communication sources, it effectively influences consumers in their product related decisions. The dynamics of the opinion leadership may be discussed under the following headings:
1. Credible source of information
2. Provision of both positive and negative product information
3. Source of information and advice

4. Two-way Street
5. Specific characteristics

1. Credible Source
Opinion leaders are knowledgeable. Their advice about a product or service is considered reliable. As opinion leaders are informal sources of information, it is perceived that they give advice in the best interest of opinion seekers. The first-hand information received from opinion leaders helps in reducing perceived risks. It properly tackles the anxiety in buying new products as the opinion is based on the first-hand experience.

2. Provision of both Positive and Negative Product Information
Marketers provide information which is invariably favourable to the products they are marketing. But opinion leaders are not directly associated with marketers. They provide both favourable and unfavourable information about the product. So, opinion seekers have faith in opinion leaders. They are confident that they are receiving both positive and negative information in an accurate way.

3. Sources of Information and Advice
Opinion leaders are the source of both information and advice. They simply share their experience about a product or service. Their talk is related to what they know about a product. In their more aggressive talks, they advise others to buy or avoid a specific product. They base their advice on proper reasons.

4. Two-way Street
Opinion leaders in one product related situation become opinion receivers in another situation even for the same product. For example, a new homeowner thinking of buying a lawn mover seeks information and advice from other people about which brand to select. After purchasing the lawn mover, he may be satisfied with the product (in the post purchase experience). Now he has a compelling need to talk favourably about the purchase to other people to confirm the correctness of his choice. In the first instance, he is an opinion receiver and in the second he is an opinion leader.

Sometimes, an opinion leader is influenced by an opinion receiver. For example, a person may recommend a favourite hotel to his friend. In response the opinion receiver gives his own comments on that hotel. Finally, the opinion leader may come to realize that the hotel is too small, too isolated and offers fewer amenities than other hotels.

5. Specific Characteristics
Opinion leaders possess distinct personality traits. These include self confidence and gregariousness. They are socially inclined, outspoken and are knowledgeable.

Types of Opinion Leadership

There are two types of opinion leadership: monomorphic and polymorphic.

Monomorphic opinion leadership
Domain-specific measure of individual differences, that is, a person that is an opinion leader in one field may be a follower in another field. An example of a monomorphic opinion leader in the field of computer technology, might be a neighbourhood computer service technician. The technician has access to far more information on this topic than the average consumer and has the requisite background to understand the information, though the same person

might be a follower at another field (for example sports) and ask others for advice. In contrast,

Polymorphic opinion leaders
Able to influence others in a broad range of domains. Variants of polymorphic opinion leadership include market mavenism, personality strength and generalized opinion leadership. So far, there is little consensus as to the degree these concepts operationalize the same or simply related constructs.

Methods of Measuring Opinion Leadership
As Opinion Leaders act as a vital link between marketers and consumers, the marketers are always concerned with
i.   the identification of such people in a social structure who are Opinion Leaders
ii. the identification of people who have the potential to become Opinion Leaders
iii. the measurement of Opinion Leadership. In order to measure Opinion Leadership

It is essential that Opinion Leaders with respect to the product/service category are identified. It is also important that people who have the potential to become Opinion Leaders are also identified. There are three ways in which Opinion Leaders can be identified; these are listed as follows:
A. marketers directly ask the consumers whether they are Opinion Leaders.
B. they ask a subject expert to identify who the Opinion Leaders are.
C. they study the communication patterns and flows among consumers, interpret the dynamics and identify the leaders.

These methods, in particular the third one help marketers to identify the traits and characteristics that make up an Opinion Leader for a type of product or service category. It also helps the marketer understand the behaviour of Opinion Leaders and the dynamics underlying the Opinion Leadership process. Marketers are interested in identifying, measuring and analyzing the impact of the opinion leadership process on consumption patterns and consumption behaviour.

An understanding of the traits and characteristics of Opinion Leaders, their behaviour and the very dynamics of the Opinion Leadership process is helpful to the marketer. Once the marketers have identified the general traits and characteristics of Opinion Leaders, they can target their marketing efforts, particularly the communication programme at all such consumers who possess such traits and characteristics. Marketers would provide them with information about the product and product category, about the brand, about the usage, its benefit and utility etc. They would also tell them about the various attributes and features, the price and the availability. Once such people (Opinion Leaders or those who have the potential to become Opinion Leaders) are exposed with such a message, they would in turn talk about it to others in their social group. This would make the job easier for a marketer. All this would ultimately lead to an informal spread of product news, advice and experiences. As has been discussed earlier, WOM communication has a greater impact on consumption behavior as it is regarded as being credible, without any hidden/ulterior motives. As far as measurement of Opinion Leadership is concerned, researchers make use of various methods. According to Rogers,

There are four basic techniques for measuring Opinion Leadership, viz. i) the self-designating method; ii) the sociometric method; iii) the key informant method; and iv) the objective method. Each of these is explained and critically assessed as follows:-

1. Self-designating method: A marketing survey is conducted and people are asked a series of questions to determine the degree to which they behave as Opinion Leaders. Questions pertain to: a) the extent to which they have given information and advice about a product/service category and/or brands to others in the social system b) how often they have been able to influence the purchase decisions about others. c) how often they have been approached by others for information and advice about that particular product/service category Advantages: It is easy to include and apply in market research questionnaires. It helps measure an individual's perception and assessment about his/her actual Opinion Leadership and related capacities. Disadvantages: As the technique is based on self-assessment and evaluation, it could be to lead to over-estimation of self and thus, suffer from bias. People could portray themselves as being "knowledgeable and important advisors" to others when it comes to making purchase decisions. It is also difficult to assess the outcome of the informal communication in terms of knowledge and advice. While a person may report that he provides information and advice, and helps people make purchase decisions, it may not be essential that the receivers may be actually using this information and advice. Thus, success of the technique would depend on the objectivity with which a respondent can identify, assess and report his personal influence. The final assessment needs to be made by the marketer. The marketer must understand the degree of relevance the Opinion Receivers/Seekers attach to the information and advice that they receive from the various so-called Opinion Leaders. This assessment would help the marketer identify who among the many are Opinion Leaders and who are not.

2. Sociometric method: The sociometric method of measuring Opinion Leadership basis itself on the study of the social system, and particularly the communication patterns and flows to identify those to give information and advice as act as Opinion Leaders. Researchers examine complete patterns of informal information flows among consumers of a particular product/service category, and identify those who provide information to others as Opinion Leaders. While the technique makes use of the analysis of the communication flow, it also uses questionnaires that are administered to people in a social system. People in a social system are asked to identify: a) those people to whom they have given information and advice about a product/service category. In case the respondent identifies one or many people to whom he has provided information and advice, he is regarded as an Opinion Leader. Researchers could cross-examine by contacting and questioning the Receiver/Seekers of information and confirming from them those people to whom they have gone for information and advice about a product or service category and/or brand. Her again, researchers could cross-examine by contacting and questioning the Opinion Leaders and confirming from them. Advantages: The technique can meet tests of validity and reliability. Chances of misconception and bias are less. Disadvantages: It is a costly in terms of both money and time. In order to obtain results that are valid and reliable, it requires intensive and extensive data, i.e. a large amount of information from a large sample of respondents. This could be expensive and time consuming. The analysis could also be complex and would require experts in the area.

iii) Key informant method: Based on careful observation and analysis of social communication, key informants in a social system are identified. These key informants are asked to identify and/or designate individuals in the social group who are Opinion Leaders or who are most likely to be Opinion Leaders. The key informants are those who are aware about the communication patterns in a social environment and able to provide a fair and impartial assessment of these patterns. They may or may not be a member of such group(s); they may be active participants or passive observers. In this way (where an expert is asked to

identify Opinion Leaders), the technique is better than the self-designating method (where a person is asked to assess himself as an Opinion Leader). Advantages: This is relatively less expensive and time consuming, as compared to the sociometric method. The study is based on a chosen few rather than large samples in the self-designating and sociometric methods. Disadvantages: If informants are not carefully chosen, they may provide wrong information.

iv) Objective method: The objective method is based on simulation. It identifies and measures Opinion Leadership by placing people in controlled environments (just as controlled experiments). People are chosen, given information about new products and service categories, and the asked to act out as Opinion Leaders. The resulting "web" and "patterns" of informal interpersonal communication regarding the relevant product or service category are traced and analysed. The technique thus measures the results of their efforts and assesses how successful their impact is on consumption behaviour. Advantages: It measures people's abilities to provide news and advice and influence purchase decisions in controlled environments. Disadvantages: It is time consuming as it requires setting up of experimental designs. It is a complex process and requires subject experts and trained psychologists.