Influence at Scale
Thanks to social media, a shift in influence has taken place—evolving from a small group of endorsing celebrities, to a few thousand influential individuals with high Klout scores, to millions of ordinary consumers. Accenture has a name for this development: influence at scale.
This shift is having a profound effect on consumer buying behaviors, which increasingly are being driven by everyday people as they spread their influence across the nodes of their trusted networks. Technology has been the catalyst, changing the mode of influence by making it even easier for individuals to share opinions and content with their close friends and beyond.

Some companies have recognized the influential power that ordinary consumers hold, and are targeting and engaging with them across various social media platforms and technologies. Other companies need to ramp up quickly, reaching out to individual influencers with compelling content to create distinction and competitive advantage.

In either case, organizations that use analytics and metrics to define and refine their marketing campaigns stand to gain the most as they work to tap into the influence potential of ordinary consumers.

A shift in influence has occurred

Social media and the Internet have made consumers more connected than ever before, enabling an unprecedented and highly efficient flow of information among individuals. Think of it as an online—and highly amplified—word of mouth. As just one example, the average number of contacts a person has on Facebook is 2291 (close friends, family members, co-workers and casual acquaintances) with whom she can interact, whether by sharing updates, posting pictures, or exchanging opinions about products and brands.

These contacts comprise the individual’s trusted network—and she exerts some degree of influence over these people as she makes her daily posts, or indicates her likes and dislikes, even though she is not a well-known celebrity or highly-influential individual (as identified by a Klout score). In fact, the mere point that she is ‘just like the rest of us’ is what makes her trustworthy to her network. In this way, ordinary people have become powerful influencers—or what Accenture calls influence at scale. In many cases, the opinions shared by people across their trusted networks also drive consumer buying behaviors. How? During social media exchanges, these individuals often talk about products and brands, such as their favorite kind of jeans or preferred type of beverage. According to a study by Berger and Iyengar, an average consumer talks about 12 different brands on a given day over various channels,2 and these social transmissions can have a significant impact on what people buy and how they behave.3

Case in point, if the Facebook user talks about a particular brand of jeans or certain carbonated, vitamin enhanced water with her trusted network, it is because she finds these items to be interesting or relevant to her life. Furthermore, her contacts believe her opinions are sincere because they know her, and trust her recommendations. In fact, a recent survey by Nielsen showed that 92 percent of consumers trust recommendations from people they know when they are purchasing a new product.4

Given this authenticity, the contacts are more likely to remember her opinions when shopping online for their own jeans or buying beverages at the grocery store. In contrast, people have become cautious at best, and cynical at worst, to the recommendations from companies (the same Nielsen survey indicated that less than 50 percent of consumers trust recommendations from company-sponsored sources)5 or to the influence of a celebrity who is being paid to endorse a line of jeans. And while the Klout approach may work for companies the first time, the opinion of a highly-influential person, who may have received a free case of beverages as an incentive to spread the word, only reaches a limited audience. The law of diminishing returns will quickly set in, leaving companies wondering what to do next.

A number of leading companies have recognized influence at scale as a powerful marketing practice and are successfully engaging with ordinary consumers, and by extension, with their social networks. Although these companies cannot completely control these everyday interactions, they can:

- Leverage technology to achieve scalability and extend their influence over ordinary consumers.
- Analyze data and track metrics related to these conversations to measure effectiveness and refine the associated marketing programs.

Companies that have not yet incorporated the influence at scale insight and tactic into their sales and marketing plans are missing a prime opportunity.
Extending influence through sharing and pinning

Clearly, technology has made it even easier for ordinary consumers to broadly share both opinions and interests with their trusted network. In this sense, it has magnified the power that individuals have as influencers on other consumers. Companies can take advantage of this paradigm shift by targeting and engaging ordinary consumers, and by leveraging the social media and Internet technologies through which influence flows to achieve scalability.

Sharing on Facebook falls into this category. For this strategy to work, companies must provide consumers with the right kind of ‘sharable’ content, such as interesting pictures featuring a product or customized messages targeting a specific group of people. Providing sharable content increases the likelihood that people will connect to the brand, and talk positively about a particular company and its products. Naturally, creativity and relevance are crucial.

To illustrate, a well-known beer company uses its Facebook brand page to communicate with a vast audience of more than 3.6 million fans. A few of these people could be classified as highly influential according to a Klout score, but most are not. The content that the company posts on its page includes clever product photos and taglines, and targeted messages that appeal to different audiences, such as NASCAR fans or veterans.

In each case, people can forward these miniature advertisements simply by clicking the share button (the influence mechanism). Although the content is temporal in that the message flows from one person to the next and then disappears, it is dispersed quickly and thoroughly through a wide variety of social networks. In fact, a single photo could be shared tens of thousands of times as an endorsed link, reaching an audience that is potentially larger than the company’s fan base.

From a technical perspective, companies can leverage this sharing strategy by integrating their existing services, such as websites and mobile apps, with online social networks so that their customers can seamlessly share the company-provided content with their contacts. To determine which messages are shared the most, companies can mine their existing databases. For instance, they can focus on their social media fan pages, and analyze the number of shares for different posts. They also can slice and dice the data to understand which messages were most heavily shared by each segment.

Another influence mechanism that is gaining ground is pinning. Pinterest, an online bulletin board for content that is organized around an interest, such as cooking or do-it-yourself projects, is one notable site in this area. The viewable content is longer lasting since each individual typically has multiple boards with stored content.

An innovative example of the pinning concept is Polyvore, a website that allows individuals to mix and match pictures of clothing or other fashion items found on the Internet into a single set. Once complete, people can forward their sets to Pinterest or other social networking sites so that their trusted networks can view them. Although at this point relatively few people are Polyvore creators, many people are sharing their creations, reflecting the opportunity for this influence mechanism. Some retailers have recognized the potential and begun to integrate with sites like Polyvore, which makes it easier for a specific retailer’s customers to create sets using content from the retailer’s online inventory.

Technically speaking, companies can leverage this pinning strategy by integrating with sites like Pinterest so that customers can easily pin brand-originated material through the company’s website or mobile app. To increase demand, companies also must coordinate with third-party creation tools, such as Polyvore. For metrics, companies should maintain a database that tracks traffic (to the company website) driven by each shared pin. From there, it will be necessary to integrate the traffic database with existing company databases (past purchases, transactions, fan page participation, demographics, etc.) to construct a 360-degree view of each customer.

Companies also can analyze the creator applications and identify co-occurrences of goods, such as clothing, within sets. This data will help companies understand which combinations customers prefer, which can then be used to provide suggestions to customers as they create new sets.
Steps for achieving influence at scale

To leverage strategies such as sharing and pinning—or to dream up their own ways to target ordinary consumers—companies should take the following steps.

- Learn about existing social media technologies in the market. Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+ and YouTube are all popular and well-defined social media and Internet platforms. But it is equally important to keep watch for emerging platforms like Houzz and Instagram, as the landscape is evolving daily.

- Seek to understand which segment of a company’s customer base interacts with which platforms. For instance, 80 percent of the Pinterest users in the US are female, whereas the number is much closer to 50 percent females/50 percent males for Facebook and Twitter users.

- Identify what kind of content people like to share and when. Since these are ordinary consumers as opposed to paid influencers, they will share whatever they want whenever they want. Combining this information with demographics will enable companies to provide the right content at the right time, and maximize the engagement.

- Look at customer behavior at a given social media platform. If they are sharing third-party content, what are the sources? Options include internal brand and community pages, or external websites and tools. Figure out the sharing patterns of these customers in terms of what type of content is shared when and by which segment. If third-party tools are heavily used for sharing, companies can employ these tools on their websites and social media brand pages.
Refining campaigns with analytics and metrics

By analyzing data, companies have a unique opportunity to understand how their customers interact with and influence each other’s purchase decisions. The analytics technology is available now to generate insights that can drive substantial new growth. However, many companies are still standing on the sidelines, as decision makers have not yet fully understood the potential of this data.

Accenture is actively monitoring influence at scale and working with clients to develop strategies that help fulfill its promise. From a technical standpoint, this includes helping our clients incorporate social APIs and social data into their existing systems, as well as developing new analytical models to utilize social data effectively.

As a first step, we suggest companies incorporate a social log-in tool, which allows ordinary consumers to log into a corporate website using an existing social media account, rather than registering for a new account. Social log-in makes it possible for companies to utilize social networking sites’ APIs to fetch valuable and highly structured customer data. It also makes it possible for companies to match their customers’ profiles across otherwise unrelated data sources, such as purchase history and fan page participation, using social log-in user names as unique keys to further enrich their databases. This, in return, enables companies to track and aggregate sharing behavior, which helps them to understand which segments share what types of content and when. (For more information about social log-in, see the related Accenture Technology Labs’ point of view “An Interest-Based Approach for Content Personalization.”)

Using analytical models, companies can partially observe how their consumers interact with each other, as well as with a particular company. These analytics also can show how marketing messages are propagating on a social network, what customers prefer to share, and the role of these activities on consumers’ purchase decisions.

As a final step, companies should establish key metrics (brand awareness, sales revenues, loyalty measures and influence mechanisms) and use the collected data to calculate how metrics are affected by social media interactions. Using these metrics, companies can fine tune and optimize their campaigns targeting ordinary consumers.

Influencing the influencer

On the surface, influence at scale may seem like a subtle tactic. In truth, it’s a powerful phenomenon. Sites like Pinterest and Polyvore—and newcomers like Houzz or Instagram—are rapidly changing the game, adding entirely new ways for ordinary consumers to step into the role of influencers at an unprecedented scale. Companies of all shapes and sizes have a unique opportunity to get involved now, or risk being left behind. By leveraging social media and Internet technology integration expertise, they can master this influence at scale capability—and be positioned to provide the long-term sway over their consumer base that will drive significant results.

References


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