

This Just In... reports are a quick summary of new health marketing and communication research and trends. These brief “nuggets” spotlight new findings with communication practice implications for CDC and its public health partners.

Brought to you by the Marketing and Communication Strategy Branch in the Division of Health Communication and Marketing, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

New study finds that the fractured web community impacts marketing focus

Research objective: Working with online communities has long been touted as a great way for a company to save money in its marketing, support, sales, and even product development. But for most companies, the diversity of communities online, and the challenge of learning how to work with them, is daunting. Most companies don't understand how online communities work, how they make a difference, and how to engage with them. In other words, this study looked at how we can better understand how people in the U. S. use the web, with a special focus on the web community and its effects on consumers.

Methods: The survey was conducted online using respondents sourced from a national sampling company. A final sample of 3,036 web users age 13 and up living in the United States completed the survey.

Findings: The common perception of web communities is that they allow groups of people to share ideas and information, and that they allow companies to communicate directly with their customers. While this is factually true it is also misleading. The results indicate that the vast majority of online conversation is driven by a small group of web users—about 10% of them. The rest of the web community sits back and watches the interactions as a mostly-passive audience that only occasionally injects a few comments.

In addition, the most frequent contributors are the “influencers” who have a strong influence on purchase decisions because they write most of the online recommendations and reviews. Online comments and reviews posted by the “enthusiasts” are second only to word of mouth as a purchase driver for all web users. These personal reviews are far more influential than official reviews posted by a website or magazine, or information posted online by a manufacturer.

“Enthusiasts/Influencers” are different from the average web user in that they are more likely to be ethnically diverse; technically skilled; single; work in technology, entertainment, or communication companies; Democrats; and younger than typical users—half of the web’s most frequent contributors are under 22 years of age.

Practice implications for health marketers and communication professionals:

These findings mean online community matters enormously to organizations. Online discussion is a poor way to communicate with the average customer because average customers don't interact. However, it is a great way to communicate to them, because average customers watch and listen. Within this vein, consider focusing more on the impact of online user comments on health decision making. Since most of these comments are generated by a small percentage of users, but are also the most enthusiastic web users, use your website to reach out to them and make sure their needs for health information are being met. These findings corroborate other recent research demonstrating that individuals who are influential in others' decision making are people who are active contributors in the virtual world, not just passive readers (The New York Times Customer Insight Group, 2008). Also, try to encourage the passive readers to become more active (i.e., post to a blog, etc.). In addition, consider creating an online community that will reach the average customer interested in health issues. There are three categories of very successful sites: (1) Sites that get a lot of daily use from large numbers of people (search and social sites are good examples); (2) sites that get occasional use from large numbers of people (reference, shopping, etc.); and (3) sites that get intense usage from small numbers of people but are ignored by everyone else. In public health work, consider focusing your efforts on the first category of a successful website.

Formal Citation: Max, H. & Mace, M. (2008, October 22). Online communities and their impact on Business: Ignore at your peril. Rubicon Consulting, Inc. (Non peer-reviewed research report)

Also see: The New York Times Customer Insight Group (2008, October 20). The New York Times releases results of first ever public study of word of mouth among affluent women. The Segmentation Company and Just Ask A Woman.

For additional information, send comments and questions to MCSBHealthMktg@cdc.gov, or contact Lynn Sokler, Chief, MCSB, at LSokler@cdc.gov