

BRAND INFLUENCERS

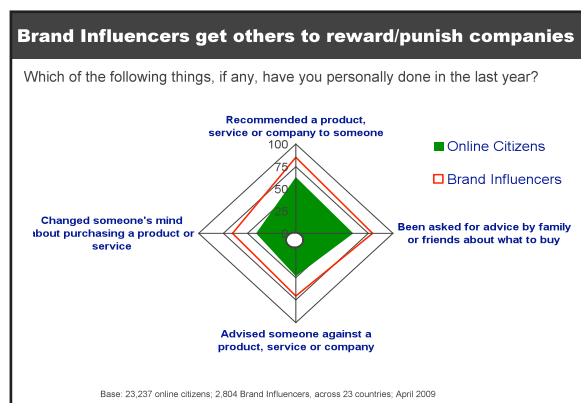
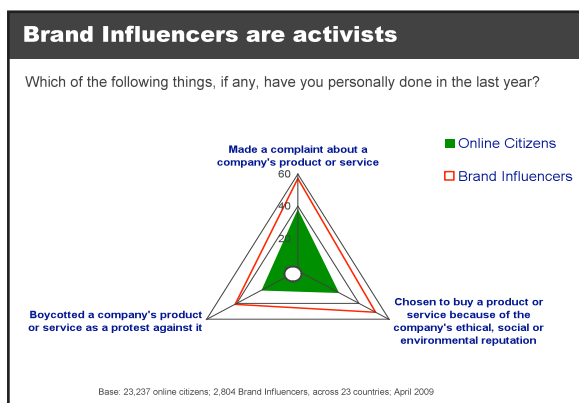
OPINION LEADERS THAT COMPANIES CANNOT AFFORD TO IGNORE

Whether you see them as mavens or connectors, as Malcolm Gladwell does in his book, *The Tipping Point*, or simply as opinion leaders, there is little doubt that in most markets around the world a small but influential group of consumers can have a disproportionate effect on the reputation and success of companies and brands. Clearly, the traditional opinion former groups, like the media, government, industry analysts and NGOs, are very important to have on your side, but so too are opinion leaders within the wider general public. These are the people who can start the Bandwagon rolling; they can be instrumental in building positive or negative sentiment around your brand, at both corporate and product/service level. As Edelman's Trust Barometer demonstrates, consumers are much more likely to believe what 'people like me' say about companies than they are to believe the CEO or other employees of the company, government or even NGOs.

So who are these opinion leaders that other consumers turn to for trusted information about companies, how do their views differ from 'Mr or Mrs/Ms/Miss Average' and, importantly, how can companies engage with them?

Recent research conducted by Ipsos across 23 countries globally shows that Brand Influencers, as we call this group, tend to be more highly educated than average, with above average income. They are also more socially active and informed. They are present in all age groups, young and old, but are more likely to be men than women in most countries – but not in all.

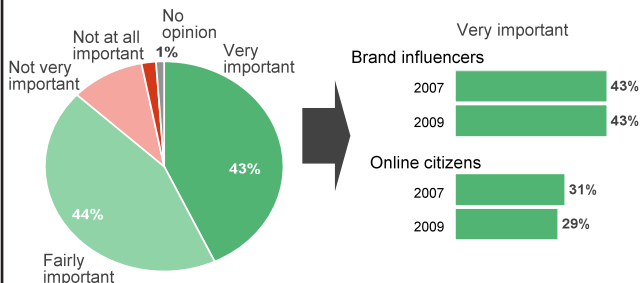
As the charts below show, they are more interventionist than the general population, being more likely to complain if they have a problem with a product or service and more likely to actively avoid or actively chose to buy from a company based on some aspect of that company's reputation. More importantly still, their opinions are sought by others and their perceptions can influence and change the behaviours of people around them. For instance, nearly seven in ten say that, in the past year, they have advised someone against a product, service or company and two-thirds say that they have actually changed that person's mind about buying a product or service.



In her article, *Getting the Green Light*, Jenny Dawkins talks about the continuing importance of corporate responsibility to consumers globally. Brand Influencers are even more likely than the wider general public to value corporate responsibility, and despite the economic downturn, the value that they place on this has held up and is virtually the same as it was two years ago. They are sending a clear message to companies that management should not take their eyes off this area of their business, even in these difficult times.

Brand influencers think responsibility very important

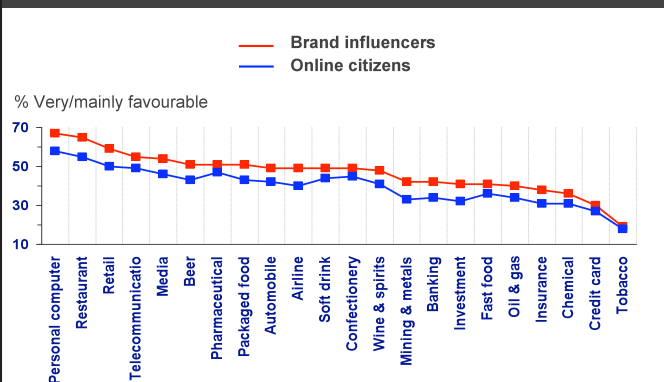
When forming a decision about buying a product or service from a particular company or organization, how important is it to you that it shows a high degree of social responsibility?



Base: 23,237 online citizens; 2,804 Brand Influencers, across 23 countries; April 2009

Being better informed, Brand Influencers naturally feel more familiar with individual sectors and companies and this often (though not always) breeds favourability towards them. And since they are more likely to speak out about the things they believe in, when they form an opinion about a company, they are more like to tell others – good or bad.

Brand Influencers more opinionated about business

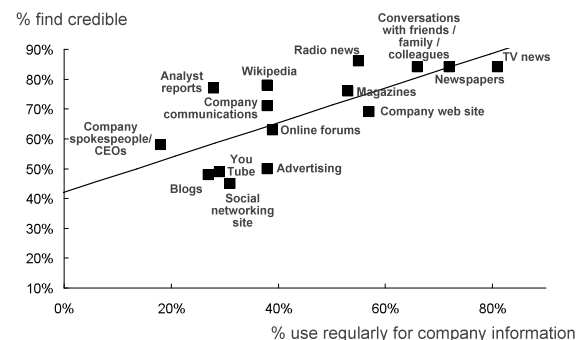


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So how do companies best engage with this important group? Being more socially active and informed, Brand Influencers take their information from a wider range of sources than the general public, and importantly are more likely to make use of company sources like company web sites, press releases, newsletters, annual reports, and company spokespeople (though like the wider population, few consult company spokespeople on a regular basis). Like the wider general public, though, they are most likely to use television news, newspapers and friends/family/colleagues as their main sources of information about companies and these, together with radio news, are most trusted. While friends/family/colleagues are some of the most trusted sources of information on companies, many are sceptical about social media, like Facebook, blogs and YouTube.

When it comes to company communication channels, Brand Influencers, like consumers generally, are sceptical about corporate advertising. They are more likely to trust a company's spokespeople than its advertising – three in five find company spokespeople/CEOs credible, but nevertheless just one in six finds them **very** credible. Furthermore, just a third of Brand Influencers trust CEOs of large companies to tell the truth about their company or industry, a level of trust which is slightly down since we first measured it among this group in 2007 (from 36% to 33%).

Friends/family/colleagues among most trusted sources



Base: 2,804 Brand Influencers, across 23 countries; April 2009

The clear implication of this is that, while Brand Influencers are more likely than consumers generally to make use of company sources of information, like the general public, it is the media and people close to them who they place most trust in. It emphasises just how important it is to develop and maintain good relations with the press to ensure positive coverage on TV and radio news and therefore positively influence the views of Brand Influencers. At the same time, it also shows how crucial it is to get the customer interface just right, as it affects not only the views of your immediate customers but also those they talk to, particularly if these customers fall into this key opinion forming group. The Brand Influencers are the antithesis of the passive consumer and will quickly translate their beliefs about your company into words and actions – and the effect of their opinions are likely to be felt far and wide.

Ipsos MORI will be running its next survey of Global Brand Influencers in October this year, covering the views of this important audience in 22 markets.

Please contact:

janette.henderson@ipsos.com

or your regular Ipsos MORI contact if you wish to subscribe.