

Getting at what really drives your brand's growth.

# Sixth Sense

## How important are influencers?

**Eric Plaskonos:** With the advent of social networking, individual influencers may be rendered less relevant over time. We may instead begin to see groups of networked individuals gaining more influence than any one individual, and doing so on a mass scale.

But for the time being, you still need someone to be a catalyst to start a conversation. That might change in the future, but at this point influencers are still a viable part of any effort to try to establish a brand.

**Sheryl Adkins-Green:** In a high-involvement category, such as beauty care, influencers are very important to a brand's success. That influence can run the gamut from celebrities, editors, friends and relatives to your hairstylist. The more involved the category is, the more important influencers are.

But it's not like a brand can just pick out three or four people who are really going to get the brand going. If anything, it's the influencers choosing your brand versus your brand being able to choose the influencers. It's when your brand is chosen that you get that wildfire effect.

**Grant Harrison:** The influencer in health care generally is the female who is making the key decisions about health care — whether that relates to food, cleaning supplies or any of the medical issues that go on in the house. Men tend to be avoiders until there is no way of getting around it.

With Free Wheelin', our joint-venture bike program with Trek, we're starting to influence a

others through technologies such as the internet.

One of the dangers is that this tends to put more focus on the new technology than it does on the behavior itself. Technology may be enabling influence to manifest itself differently in social media and to have conversations more broadly. But we still need to stay very focused on the human nature that truly anchors the behavior.

## Data manipulation is the most exciting opportunity in research today.

ERIC PLASKONOS

different kind of discussion with people. We're finding that bikers are just so enthusiastic, not just about the bikes but about their lifestyles. We hope they will influence a big change in how people live a healthy lifestyle.

**Delaine Hampton:** At Procter & Gamble, we have always understood that influencers are extremely important. This goes back to human nature. Time and time again, we learn that people trust people who are like "me." But what is changing is that people now access the opinions of

**Zain Raj:** If it is a higher value category, influencers are extremely important; with a lower value category it's not very important at all.

So, for example, I need a whole new set of golf clubs because the golf season is starting. In that case, my golf pro is a big influencer in terms of helping me think through which one of the two brands I should consider versus becoming confused by the 12 brands that are available. But when I buy bottled water, do I care? No, not really. Yes, some people might care, but

### A ROUNDTABLE FEATURING

Eric Plaskonos  
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Sheryl Adkins-Green  
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on a large scale, we have evidence and data that clearly proves that when you spend more money on anything, influencers become really important. That's also true where style and fashion are involved — influencers become important then, too. But if it's something that's hidden from everybody, it's not as important.

### What have you learned about online social networks?

**Plaskonos:** Philips created a global network blog to try to rally folks to comment on “simplicity” — our brand positioning — and had an incredibly difficult time getting traction with it. Yet, when we embarked on a program for Norelco Bodygroom (*shaveeverywhere.com*), where we just created an idea that was very close to insight and featured content that spoke directly to the targeted audience, it exploded.

To this day, the tally is somewhere around 4.5 million visits to the site, and the product exceeded all sales expectations. The general takeaway for me is that we're all just beginning to understand what fully connected, instantaneous networks can do.

But it's clear that whomever is creating your content should also take ownership of your social network because the authenticity of the network's content fuels the interest.

**Adkins-Green:** Online social networks are certainly a very rich source of consumer insights. In terms of being able to get a very

quick check on the pulse of your franchise, or people who aren't in your franchise, it is particularly attractive to be able to plug into those networks and explore ideas and opportunities.

Beyond that, the language is so rich. When people are online, they are typically talking the way they talk to a friend. So, even in contrast to focus groups where people are trying to sound like “good” consumers, online they are a little less guarded. Because of that candor, I feel we get a much better sense of how people are feeling.

Social networks have now democratized everything and taken away the authoritative nature that brands and businesses have had in the past. The hierarchy has broken down into a completely egalitarian environment that drives towards innovation and serves as a platform for future growth.

The question is how to monetize that. Facebook and MySpace are cool and different. But how sustainable are they? Are they going to become more niche and discrete? That's part of the

## Online social networks are changing the health care system by putting the consumer at the center of it.

GRANT HARRISON

**Harrison:** Online social networks are changing the health care system by putting the consumer at the center of it. We often forget, but a lot of people are going online to look for not just information, but also support with whatever it is they are trying to deal with. That's the very personal, right-brain side of things, which is just so important.

**Raj:** One thing we're learning is that peers tend to respond to peers and that they like to build an environment where they can connect with each other. We're also learning about the dissolution of authority, if you will. The traditional marketing world was built on a brand that sent a message that either you believed or you didn't.

evolution that nobody has paid any attention to yet.

### Are there any real differences between consumer and shopper insights?

**Plaskonos:** I don't necessarily see much of a difference between shopper and consumer insights. I say that because over the last three to five years, the onset of e-commerce has completely altered the purchasing mode, and the walls between consumers and shoppers have eroded.

It used to be that consumer insight was really about the emotional connection and that

shopper insight was really the mode that they went into when buying. But now, because of e-commerce, we are always in shopping mode—and that's not in the traditional sense of procuring a good because often what we're procuring is information.

It's that way with everything today, whether you are shopping for health care or a flat-screen TV. Access to information is now pervasive in all parts of our lives and so there's not as much difference in behavior between a consumer and a shopper anymore.

**Adkins-Green:** I do see a distinction. Typically, consumer insights are most focused on consumer relationships with the product. That's very much about the role that the product plays in their lives, how they use it, when they use it, and so forth.

By comparison, shopper insights put the product in a much broader context of the shopping experience,

different shopping experiences. Some of the variables that go into those experiences are distinct from a consumer's specific relationship with whatever products she might have come in to buy.

**Harrison:** Whether it's consumer or shopper insights we want to understand people and start building products, services and experiences that they actually want to buy. So, ultimately, it's about the consumer taking action by going out and shopping.

Health care has been difficult for shoppers because the information has been really difficult to find. How good is this doctor? How good is this hospital? It's one of the drives that we're undergoing at the moment—to put information out there, so people can make informed shopping decisions.

**Raj:** Shopper insights are driven more by behavioral and environmental factors. They are driven by how the aisles are

higher order, with shopper insights as a subset of consumer insights. There is a blurring between them, but in both cases it's a question of whether you have arrived at a surprising truth that affects behavior and attitudes.

## Is ethnography everything it's cracked up to be?

**Plaskonos:** Ethnography is not ideal in all circumstances. But if you're going to make a critical decision about anything, you're going to have to involve it in some way, shape or form.

At Philips, the focus group has become less and less important as a part of our research to get honesty and true insight. The online bulletin board also has its own little oddities, in that people are never going to behave behind a computer the way they behave with another person on the street.

Ethnography still has an advantage over focus groups and online bulletin boards in terms of the depth of what you can get. You're not going to get that kind of depth from those other two research techniques because of built-in biases.

**Adkins-Green:** The closer you can get to consumers and their interaction and relationship with the product the more likely you are to get past the obvious. I remember years ago, going through kitchens and cupboards and the moms would talk about how important it was for their kids to eat healthy. But when you

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SHERYL ADKINS-GREEN

which introduces a larger array of variables—such as how much time the consumer has, what else she is trying to accomplish on the shopping trip and how that perhaps impacts how she is shopping for the product that day.

For example, shopping for cosmetics in a department store versus a drug store are very

structured and where the products are placed in the aisle. In the online environment, it's how the navigation works and how easy it is to decide which products to buy.

Consumer insights are about a certain truth that can trigger a consumer to behave a certain way or believe a certain thing. I see consumer insights as being of a

looked in the pantry, it was a whole different story.

The same is true for hair and beauty-care products. Just seeing what consumer beauty routines involve is critical to understanding ways to develop innovative solutions to their beauty needs. For example, in the last couple of days, I've seen three different presentations, that highlighted how many women are putting on their make-up in the car.

That brings up this whole notion of the ergonomics of a mascara

habitually and they don't even think about it anymore. For example, in the laundry detergent category, you might ask people if they are happy with their laundry detergent packaging. They'll say it's fine, but if you spend time with them in their laundry rooms, out come the chisels and screwdrivers and hammers to open the box. You ask them about it and they say that's the way they've always opened the box!

I hasten to add that all of this observational research never stands on its own. You would not make business plans and go

behavior that accompanies attitudes. But hyping up a technique and making it the be-all and the end-all of the way you do research and arrive at insights is wrong.

### **Are there any emerging research techniques that are particularly promising?**

**Plaskonos:** Data manipulation is the most exciting opportunity in research today. It's not about figuring out how sharp the message can be or how to make the message that much more critical. It's more about understanding actual behavior, which is derived from purchase data, click-thru data or whatever data it is that you're pulling.

The insights are buried in there, and the exciting part is that all of that is manageable now and can be turned into productive decision-making. That was completely impossible three or five years ago, but it's going to make propositions and products smarter. It's going to make the eventual service element of any consumer good that much better.

**Adkins-Green:** I can't say that there is any one technique that stands out. Any one methodology, no matter how great it is, is probably never going to be comprehensive enough to keep up with the complexity of the consumer.

The real opportunity is to determine which technique to use when and how to combine techniques so that you are getting to those insights, and getting to

### ***I see shopper insights as being a subset of consumer insights.***

ZAIN RAJ

brush that you can use while looking in the rear view mirror and not poking your eye out when the light suddenly turns green. Having done that myself, I know it's a very real challenge!

**Harrison:** Ethnography is not the be-all and end-all. You have to mix it with all sorts of qualitative and quantitative research. But in working, as I do, on innovation, ethnographic research is a great springboard for ideas that I don't get coming out of a research report. Going into someone's house, and really feeling the emotion of the situation makes a big difference.

**Hampton:** Ethnography has been very important to Procter & Gamble over the years and it will continue to be important to us. Lots of times people do things

to market without also marrying it to a lot of quantitative data. But clearly being able to observe consumers without bias, through open eyes and seeing differently is always going to be part of the fundamental craft of consumer understanding.

**Raj:** Ethnography has been an overblown, over-sold and over-hyped way for planning groups to try to find deeper insights where they sometimes don't really exist. The more sustainable way of finding insightful behavior is to look at transaction or behavioral data. Those are truer behavioral insights than what ethnographies are able to provide.

I don't think ethnography is inherently bad. In the traditional world of advertising and marketing it does give us an idea as to the



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them quickly. It is not only about getting to the insights, but getting to them first and being able to act on them quickly.

**Harrison:** At Humana, I have a team of about 30 people and we do about 75 research studies a year. What we're starting to do now is merge the research with the ideation about what to do with

that research to solve a particular business problem. So, we combine research, ideation and action and have people working across all of those teams in a more formal way. That's relatively new for us.

In many cases what happens with research is that if you don't like it, you put it in the bin. Or, if you do like it, you pick up the bits that you want. But if you tie the

that we need to learn about how it actually plays out in predicting day-to-day behaviors. There also are issues related to privacy, ethics and good science. Having said that, we are interested in developing a better understanding of what is influencing behaviors in the realm of things that people can't tell us.

**Raj:** Every company now has access to transaction data and

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research to a much more holistic process of developing new action based on the insights, you not only come up with ideas, but you also drive them through into action. Driving insights into action gives you a lot more value out of the research process.

**Hampton:** Brain scanning is getting a lot of attention because there is a lot of human behavior that can't be explained in words or rationalized. That's because the brain prefers automatic processing to hard processing, which is the more logical, reasoned kind of processing. For many decades, experimental psychologists have been using a whole range of techniques to understand how people are behaving on these automatic levels.

However, neuroresearch is still in its early days and there's still a lot

the ability to look at the behavior that people have exhibited in their categories. If you look at the data and what the actual behavior shows, you can get to better insight and better knowledge than you can through any other method. The fundamental future of the next decade will be in gaining knowledge from actual behavioral data.

You have to get at behavior because it's the only thing that matters. If you just continue working in the attitudinal world of building awareness and desire, your business will not grow. That's why marketing gets commoditized and devalued. That doesn't mean you don't do other kinds of research, too. You do need to understand the "whys," but the "whats" are the better predictors of the future. ■