

INFORMING MARKETING STRATEGY AND TACTICS WITH TIMELY GUIDANCE FROM PASSIONATES, EARLY ADOPTERS, AND POINT-OF-DECISION CONSUMERS

by Daniel Slotwiner and Audrey Rosen

By collaborating with leading-edge consumers, marketers can identify new ways to drive sales and loyalty effectively

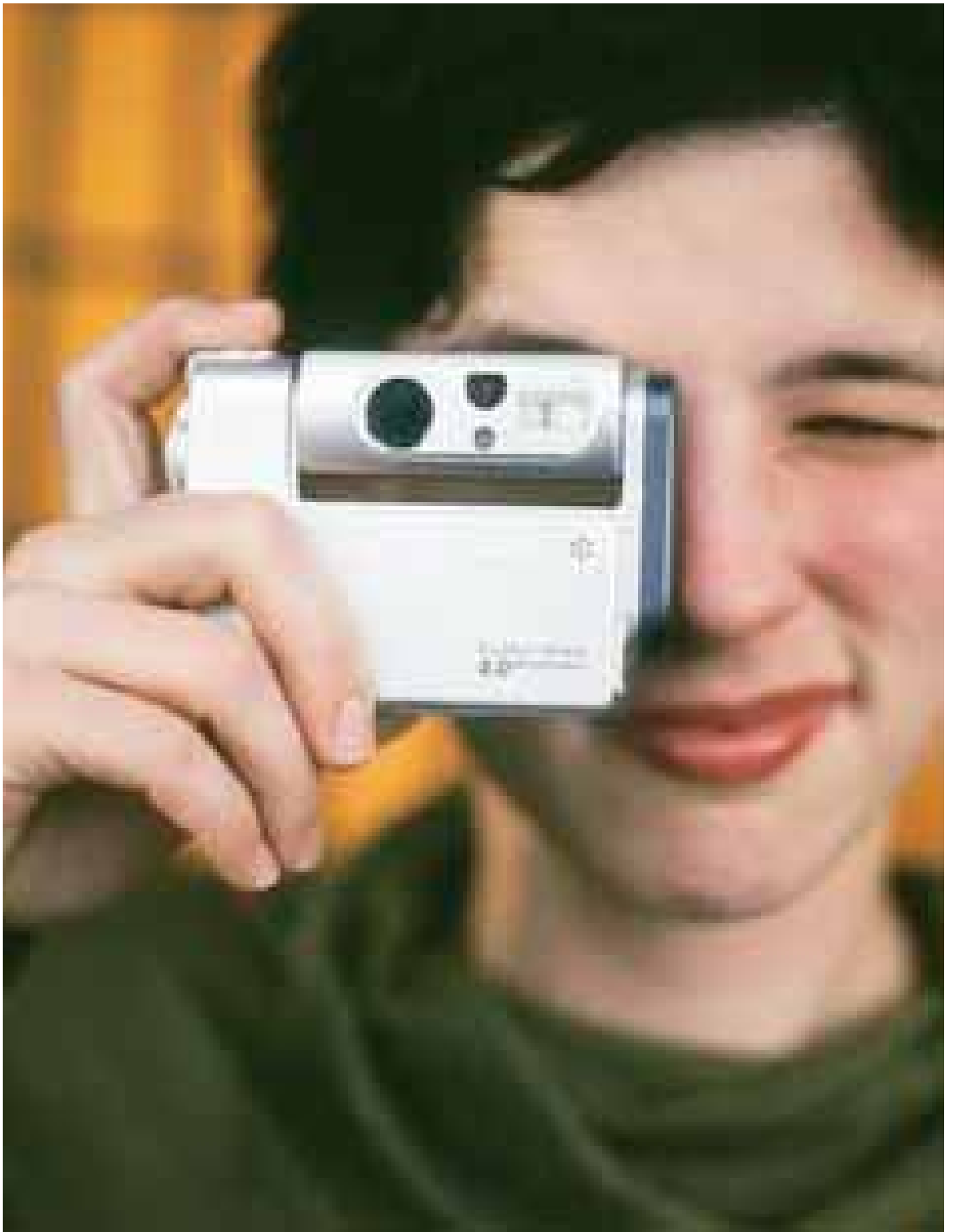
A cat lover in Chicago searches for new toys to keep his favorite feline entertained. An aspiring wine aficionado in Albany seeks the best way to identify a top-quality, reasonably priced Merlot *before* opening the bottle. A woman in Atlanta newly diagnosed with MS searches for guidance on coping with her condition.

All these people share one trait: for different and very personal reasons, they have become interested in—if not outright passionate about—a subject. Whether the issue at hand is a long-established hobby or a recently diagnosed condition, these consumers are interested and, in many cases, are seeking information that will lead to a purchase of some sort, making them invaluable to marketers. The opinions and needs of passionates, or enthusiasts, are especially important

for future-proof planning, because their approval gives any product or service offering—large or small—a head start on success.

The psychology of passionates is not like that of mainstream consumers; they may be more attuned (and possibly averse) to hype and align more closely with favorite brands—those that have proven themselves better at serving their needs and making them feel a part of the creative process. There may be an opportunity that is untapped or undiscovered that marketers will never know about unless they quantitatively listen to these consumers.

Passionates almost always have decided and powerful views on their chosen interests and needs, and they look more favorably on those who are willing to hear them out. They very often constitute the core of a franchise and



therefore offer the opinions of those who will ultimately make or break a consumer product in the first year of introduction; in short, they represent a hurdle that must be crossed before one can even think about mass success.

Examples of products and services that have made the jump from acceptance by passionate to mainstream popularity are many. Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* offers one way to understand the importance of passionate; he posits a theory of "social epidemics" in which relatively small factors—including the actions of a particular breed of passionate consumer—lead to massive societal change. These people are Innovators, cutting against

for enabling dialogue and research. One alternative is the use of *communities*—groups that have grown around content that serves a particular type of interest, giving them the specialized information that they crave with a minimum of advertising or annoying promotion.

Passionates account in part for the rise of "fan sites" and similar Internet gathering places for "true believers"—whether the object of belief is a particular skateboard wheel, an up-and-coming band, or a high-end brand of chocolate. Madison Avenue's interest in such sites shows the power of narrowly targeted content to draw influencers; but the arrival of corporate America on the scene almost

assures that enthusiasts will soon be moving on. If their behavior has already made the jump to the mainstream, then the passionate's departure will be as quiet as their arrival months or years earlier.

In the Internet age, one would think that reaching

passionates for insights into their views would be relatively easy; but the challenges are many. For example, how does one define a passionate? Whether the criterion is "X" number of purchases in a given time frame or subscription to an e-newsletter, each has flaws if one's goal is to reach those who are truly committed and engaged. Research companies often turn to those who have "self-identified" as passionate based on their answer to one or two questions in a long survey covering many topics; but these people may or may not be actual "passionates." In fact, we

ONE WAY TO WIN THE TRUST OF PASSIONATES IS THROUGH HIGH-QUALITY, HYPE-FREE INFORMATION ABOUT THEIR FAVORITE OBSESSIONS

mainstream behavior and adopting edgy fashions, technologies, and even ways of speaking when the masses still consider them "weird." Part of the Innovators' mindset is a tendency to identify with their countercultural behavior; the obscurity of their interests is a source of pride, and they seek out others who "get it."

One way to win a passionate's trust is through a direct connection with his or her favorite obsession; information on the topic—as long as it is hype-free and does not insult a passionate's sophisticated understanding of the subject—can be a powerful lever

would put forth that these consumers can self-identify via their *actions*.

If the decision to be based on research is a multi-million-dollar one, then it is crucial that *real* passionates—those who actively consider the category and buy products, use them heavily, and talk about them with friends and family—be tapped for guiding research. As with many other types of consumer information, there is often a dramatic disparity between average work and truly high-quality studies that can be used to affect decision making.

AUTHENTICITY IS ESSENTIAL

Reaching true passionates for research can be a challenge; while they love to talk about their favorite videogames or cell phones or power tools, they may be averse to helping out the “corporate powers” that they see as responsible for producing annoying, unreliable hype and inferior products for the masses. Anyone who is too eager or seems like an outsider quickly becomes *persona non grata*.

Authenticity is perhaps the most important watchword with these passionate consumers; they know the topic better than average consumers—or so they fervently believe—and they find even subtle attempts at promotion a turnoff. Their self-image is to some degree invested in the subject, so any affront is a personal one.

These communities are likely to be a reliable source of true passionates *as long as*

- their content is not promotional in nature, and thus not compromised in the enthusiast’s eye

- they attract not those who simply buy a product, but rather those who seek out information about it or related topics
- they are not based on the assumptions inherent in self-identification (social desirability of belonging, etc.)

In many cases, communities form around needs such as health conditions, from the common to the obscure; diabetes, osteoporosis, or melanoma sufferers are powerfully motivated to learn more about their conditions, to improve their quality of life—and even longevity. (*See the related article on page 26 of this issue.*) In this way, communities represent an important source of guidance for coping with a variety of rare conditions (though one certainly cannot assume that everyone who visits a disease site is a sufferer).

To create an online community that will have credibility with true enthusiasts, a few essential ingredients are necessary:

- excellent search engine status that is *not* based on identifiable paid placement or advertising; sites must appear prominently in search results without the stigma of commercialism
- content that speaks to a knowledgeable—if not downright wonkish—audience and is refreshed on a regular basis
- longevity that allows word of mouth about the site to spread along other channels; sites that appear and disappear like gypsy camps cannot allow a following to take root
- a minimum of advertising on the site, especially ads that are directly related to the topic

Through KnowledgeCommunities™—a new resource launched in collaboration with experts in the field—Knowledge Networks has pioneered the creation of virtual communities based on rich content about a variety of topics, including health and wellness, pets, and wine tasting. These communities allow marketers and policy makers access to proven enthusiasts for research; in addition to leveraging the hundreds of existing communities, new “custom” communities can be developed to meet consumer information needs.

Using the community model, one can conduct a variety of important studies that point marketing of a company, brand, or product in the best direction for success. For example, CMOs can

- canvass influencers in key interest areas to discover their other obsessions, pointing the way toward future opportunities across categories and businesses
- test the sensitivity of enthusiasts to a variety of product-integration schemes, establishing in advance how to achieve an ideal balance of product exposure and credibility
- post a variety of articles on the community site and track their use and time of viewing to discover—without intrusion—which topics are of deepest interest to passionates
- compare results of the same survey as answered by enthusiasts versus mainstream consumers to discover where each group falls on a continuum of needs and desires
- determine what will evoke the action of a person at the point of decision

The screenshot shows a web page for 'breast health focus' with the NCI logo in the top right. A navigation bar includes 'home', 'health', 'disease', 'cancer', and 'cosmetics'. The main content area features a 'related articles' sidebar with links like 'Breast Cancer', 'Symptoms of Breast Cancer', and 'Breast Cancer Diagnosis'. The central article is titled 'About Breast Cancer Statistics' and discusses the prevalence of breast cancer in women. To the right, there is a 'new treatments' section for 'Breast Cancer' with a form to enter an email address and zip code, and a 'submit' button. A privacy notice at the bottom of the form states: 'We value your privacy, your email address will never be sold or shared.'

A sample page from a KnowledgeCommunities™ Web site

The hallmarks of a reliable community research approach are clearly identifiable but not necessarily common. Once one has established a community based on rich, frequently refreshed content, turning that group into a viable research opportunity requires care and experience. The steps must include

- **A clear opt-in section:** Community members must be invited to participate in research and be sent surveys only if they agree; pushing surveys to enthusiasts who are not expecting them is a sure way to erode trust.
- **Appropriate incentives:** More than other groups, enthusiasts may be happy to provide information on their passions to researchers; but when they are compensated, the “token of appreciation” must be appropriate to the tone and ethic of the topic. A supercenter gift certificate would hardly be the right compensation for a survey about fine wine.
- **Integration of research, community elements:** Any effective solicitation for research within a community needs to follow the established community look and language; anything that radically departs from the context compromises both the survey effort and the community itself.

We would emphasize that, while enthusiast communities can provide a powerful source of insights, they should not be used in place of standard, representative research when products or services for mainstream audiences are in question. Community studies bring a depth and

specificity that other research cannot, but ultimately they represent only a narrow audience when compared to the general population. One should not, in the interest of cost savings, try to substitute one for the other.

Across nearly all public policy, health, and marketing areas, enthusiasts and early adopters represent a crucial audience for achieving success—and a vital source of guidance. That is, if one can reliably identify true enthusiasts—as well as “near-to-decision” consumers—and gain their trust for research. That process is not foolproof; it requires care and expertise if the results are to be in any sense reliable. On the other hand, with a high-quality community-based research program in place, insights can potentially be mined for many years to come. The implications for every level of planning—from corporate to product and service—can hardly be overestimated. ▀

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