OPINION LEADERS: ARE THEY REALLY IMPORTANT AS INNOVATION BUYERS?

Emma Auer, Boston State College
Herbert Rotfeld, Bowling Green State University, Ohio

Abstract

Research on the exact nature of the relationship between opinion leadership and innovative purchase behavior has produced apparently inconsistent results. This study warranted by consumer scoring the innovativeness (or lack of it) of 40 products. It included 36 other products intuitively judged to be widely diffused. The study related opinion leadership scores to scores of ownership of innovative, and noninnovative, and nonwarranted products. The results showed that opinion leadership scores were twice as likely to be related to scores of ownership of noninnovative products as they were to be related to ownership of innovative products.

Introduction

Since the new classic statement of Myers and Robertson (1972) that "opinion leaders in a topic area are more innovative for new products or ideas in that area than are nonleaders" it has been widely accepted that personal influence plays an important role in consumers' adoption of new products. Just what the degree of relationship of the attribute and the behavior actually has been the subject of much debate. And, as Summers has pointed out, research on the relationship has produced apparently inconsistent results (1971).

The ambiguity of results in this area has probably been a function of: (1) the proliferation of definitions of innovation (Engel, Blackwell and Kollat turned up 51 in all) (1978); and (2) the widespread use of surrogate measures in lieu of actual innovative purchase behavior.

Research Design

Data collection for this study was designed to minimize to the greatest degree possible the ambiguities which have plagued opinion leadership and innovative behavior research. A sample of 1200 female household purchasing agents was systematically chosen from Market Facts' Northeastern U.S. consumer panel maintained to replicate the demographics of the population at large. A total of 763 usable responses was received. Results were derived from the sample of 763, and from a subsample of 469 secured when the larger sample was rebalanced more closely to resemble the income distribution in the total U.S.

Data collected from the Market Facts' sample included:

income (in census data categories)

scores on six self designated opinion leadership items (Trohildahl, 1963)

ownership data on 40 products (shown to be owned by less than 16% of a pilot study sample prior to their inclusion in the Market Facts' sample study--though the conclusive study showed of them to have diffused rapidly to a much wider proportion of the market)

ownership data on 36 products (intuitively judged to be both introductory and early adoption stage in the product life cycle by designers of the research).

Additionally, a distinctive feature of this study was the fact that it collected data on consumer perception of the degree of innovativeness of the first 40 products mentioned above. Such data was taken on a range of one to five--five being the most innovative in the consumers' perception. Analysis of the consumer data on how innovative respondents perceived each of the 40 products to be, revealed that 20 of the 40 received average innovation scores significantly higher (.05 level, one tailed test) than the mean of the average scores of all 40 products on innovativeness. These 20 products were defined as consumer warranted innovations in terms of the sample researched at the point in time when data was taken. This criterion for defining an innovation by consumer ascription of such status to a product gives operational reality to a concept which has been given lip service in the literature of innovation but which has not been used in practice prior to this reporting.

The 20 products designated as innovations by consumers in this study were:


One of these, Mystique magazine (which seems to have died aborning shortly thereafter), proved to be owned by only two respondents, so it had to be dropped from most subsequent analysis.

The 20 products which failed to meet the test of consumer perception of innovativeness were:


Not scored for innovativeness by the sample were 36 other products which included:

Levi's, slim leg slacks, pellazo pants, hostess pajamas, ankle length separate skirt, balsam and body shampoo, regular detergent shampoo, lemon fragrance shampoo, herbal shampoo, dandruff retardant shampoo, protein shampoo, formed potato chips, regular potato chips, pretzels, peanuts (regular), peanuts (dry roasted), popcorn, corn chips, sunflower seeds, mixed nuts,
toaster, electric skillet, electric carving knife, coffee maker, blender, electric dishwasher, electric juicer, charcoal grill, sewing machine, wine making kit, number painting kit, terrarium, portable stereo, console stereo, component stereo.

The purpose of this investigation was to determine if significant relationships existed between any of these products, and self designated opinion leader scores; and to see if there existed any detectable patternings of such relationships across the whole spectrum of products which might be heuristic for further study in opinion leadership/innovativeness research.

Research Results

Chi square analysis of ownership scores and scores on six opinion leadership question showed significant relationship of:

6 of 20 innovative products related in 7 different ways (or 6.8% of 120 such possible relationships)
12 of 20 noninnovative products related in 18 different ways (or 15% of 120 such possible relationships)
15 of 36 nonwarranted products related in 31 different ways (or 14% of 216 such possible relationships). (See Appendix 1).

When tests were run on significance of difference between means of opinion leadership scores and product scores and product innovativeness perception scores of owner and nonowner samples for each of the 40 consumer warranted products and results rank ordered in terms of percentage of total sample owning the product, results appear as seen in Appendix 2.

Appendix 2 shows clearly that 23 products (18 innovative and 5 noninnovative) owned by up to 6.9% of the sample showed a total of nine relationships to opinion leadership items (6% of a possible 144). Four of the products showing five of the nine significant relationships just noted were noninnovative products. Products owned by 7% to 63.1% of the sample showed a total of 30 relationships to opinion leadership items (37% of a possible 80). Only one of the latter group was an innovative product.

Canonical analysis of opinion leadership scores as one set of data and innovative product ownership data as another set showed no significant results. Such analysis of opinion leadership scores and noninnovative product ownership scores showed one significant canonical root with legged slacks (079) owned by 63.1% of sample contributing the most to the relationship from the product set.

It may also be worth noting that significant differences between owner/nonowner sample scores of perception of innovativeness of products do not begin to appear until products are owned by at least 2% of the sample. At that point nonowner means are higher, with one exception, than owner means.

Conclusion

Analysis of data in this study shows that significant relationships between opinion leadership scores and scores on ownership of products warranted for innovativeness by consumers are twice as likely to occur with products consumers consider noninnovative than with products considered innovative. Canonical analysis and tests reiterated the higher likelihood of opinion leadership scores relating significantly to scores on ownership noninnovative products.

Additionally, this study points to the need for further investigation of the point at which differences between means of perception of innovativeness scores of owners and nonowners become wide enough to be significant. Such a point may well give a statistical marker of when a product has passed through the first and hazardous stage of introduction and is starting the climb in public popularity (i.e. when a sample at least large enough to account for significance now considers such a product "familiar" and not maximally innovative).

References


