
Originally published in Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, 22(1), 67–89.
Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13555851011013164
Who are “innovators” and do they matter?

A critical review of the evidence supporting the targeting of “innovative” consumers

Heath McDonald, Deakin Business School, Malvern, Australia

Frank Alpert, University of Queensland Business School, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to bring together and evaluate the reasons that have historically been advanced to justify the heavy emphasis on innovative consumers within the general context of the adoption of products and services, and to assess the strategic benefits to be gained from targeting such market segments.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach is critical review and analysis of the published literature.

Findings – This paper finds that, although the benefits of identifying innovative early adopters are not as strong and clear-cut as is often claimed, they are still sufficient to warrant further research into methods that will accurately identify them and predict their purchasing behaviour.

Practical implications – Targeting strategies should distinguish carefully between truly innovative consumers and other early adopters. The costs of identifying them in a particular market need to be weighed against the potential benefits.

Originality/value – Although many studies have attempted to address the question of what drives individual adoption behaviour, the rationale for that focus has not been well established and is rarely critiqued. In clarifying the situation, this paper should provide guidance for academic researchers and marketing planners.

Article Type:

Conceptual paper

Keyword(s):

Innovation; Consumer behaviour; Market segmentation; Marketing strategy; Marketing planning.
Introduction: the rationale for studying innovative consumer behaviour

Marketing texts generally do not discuss the reasons for undertaking research into adoption and diffusion processes, perhaps because this research field was already well established by the time marketing academics showed serious interest in it. The study of diffusion behaviour started with anthropologists, and spread throughout other disciplines such as sociology, psychology and geography. Rogers (2003) provides a complete history.

These studies often have the understanding of human behaviour as their core goal. Marketing as a discipline, though, is concerned with understanding human behaviour primarily as a means to other ends, perhaps forecasting such future events as sales, and as a guide to maximising the effectiveness of corporate marketing activities (Hunt, 1991; Moorman and Rust, 1999). Although marketing research frequently synthesises the findings of other disciplines into marketing theory, the motives that those other disciplines have for studying individual adoption behaviour do not necessarily justify the interest of marketing scholars.

Some marketing authors argue in broad terms, claiming that individual adoption behaviour is so crucial to marketing activities that its study seems almost compulsory. Hirschman (1980, p. 283), for example, says “Few concepts in the behavioural sciences have as much immediate relevance to consumer behaviour as innovativeness”.

These broad arguments calling for more research and understanding of innovative behaviour could be criticised for being “ivory tower” perspectives, unless that increased understanding can be shown to have some practical benefit. The question at the heart of this research topic is commonly overlooked, namely “what is the benefit of being able to identify and target innovators?” The purpose of this paper is to address these questions directly, and review the evidence from past research.

What constitutes “innovative” behaviour?

In many past research studies, innovators are conceptually defined as those who adopt an innovation earliest, which seems somewhat tautological. An important distinction needs to be made, however, between different types of early adopters based on the information sources they use to make their adoption decisions. The early buyers of any new product or service will include some adopting independently and some acting under the influence of word-of-mouth and other people's experience. True innovators, who are defined here as both early and independent adopters, provide a wide range of benefits to the provider of a new product or service, whereas the imitative early adopters provide only a subset of these benefits. The first step in evaluating the worth of innovators is to define exactly what and who they are, and past research has not always been clear on this.

Many of the problems that retard research into innovation and innovative behaviour stem from a lack of consensus about the way in which key concepts should be defined and thus operationalised. Two major definitions of “innovativeness” exist. The latest version of the seminal text (Rogers, 2003, p. 22) defines innovativeness as “the degree to which an individual is relatively earlier in adopting new ideas than other members of a (social)
system”. This definition and categorisation of innovators is clearly time dependent; those adopting early are “innovators”. The distinction is made simply by determining the mean time taken to adopt an innovation, and classifying those who do so two standard deviations or more before the mean time as being the “innovative” 2.5 per cent of the population. In other words, this is a purely statistical artefact.

Such a definition contains an element of circular logic; early adopters are defined as those who adopt early. It therefore does not offer any new insight into the reasoning behind the action of innovating, and so is a construct that brings us no closer to understanding the phenomenon it studies. Operationalising this definition, though simple after the fact, cannot be done prior to an innovation launch. The arbitrary categorisation of the first 2.5 per cent of all adopters as innovators can happen only after the diffusion process has taken place – meaning such a definition has no predictive ability. If innovators were more than just first adopters, if they had other meaningful characteristics and were defined in those terms, then one could develop theories to predict the adoption behaviour of individuals in a market and identify likely early adopters in advance.

Other researchers have attempted to overcome this problem by employing a cross-sectional technique, where the adoption time lag of past products is used as a predictive measure for a new, similar innovation. Midgley and Dowling (1978) point out that such a method suffers from both measurement problems (consumer recall of past adoption times not being accurate), and theoretical problems (innovation being considered to be product-category specific, and therefore not a good way of predicting future actions with respect to different products). With these problems in mind, this time-based definition of innovativeness is clearly too simple to be adequate.

In the same paper, Midgley and Dowling developed an alternative conceptualisation of innovativeness, based on earlier work by Midgley (1977, p. 49):

Innovativeness is the degree to which an individual makes innovation decisions independently of the communicated experience of others.

The obvious difference here is that no longer is innovative behaviour considered to be solely defined in terms of time of adoption but rather on kind of information type taken into account by the consumer when making the decision to adopt or not. Thus, innovation could take place very late in the diffusion cycle of a product, provided that the individual as making the adoption decision based on mass communications rather than interpersonal communications. The concept has now been divorced from the observed behaviour; thereby, it is argued, allowing greater understanding of the process.

This definition owes much to the work of Bass (1969) who, when modelling aggregate market behaviour, inferred that the commonly seen exponential growth pattern of most product diffusion (the S-curve) had to be caused by communicated experience or word-of-mouth. Bass categorised consumers as “innovators” and “imitators” on the basis of their reliance on word-of-mouth.
Midgley and Dowling (1978, 1993) further distinguish between “actualised” innovativeness (occurring at the time of adoption) and “innate” innovativeness (a personality trait held to some degree by all members of society). Both Bass (1969) and Midgley and Dowling (1978) claim that the first 2.5 per cent of adopters (the Rogers definition) could include “innate innovators” who have actualised their innovativeness, and “imitators” whose decision has been influenced by the actions and communications of others. It is therefore possible for people who have a high degree of innate innovativeness to adopt very late in the lifecycle of a product.

Hirschman (1980) reactivated research into the similar concept of “novelty seeking” arguing that innovative behaviour develops within consumers over time, and that it is the trait in consumers that drives actualised adoption. Again, innate characteristics and actual behaviours are differentiated. This conceptualisation has not been investigated by many other researchers and, apart from some conceptual insights, does not seem to offer any new, practical direction. Dickerson and Gentry (1983) and Goldsmith and Hofacker (1991) are examples of the few who have nevertheless pursued this research direction.

Textbooks of marketing management and consumer behaviour generally cover the theory of adoption of innovations at a level of detail varying from a paragraph through a section to a chapter. The latest edition of Kotler’s perennially popular *Marketing Management* (Kotler and Keller, 2006, p. 660), for example, concludes an overview of the Rogers adopter groups with: “Each of these five groups must be approached with a different type of marketing if the firm wants to move its innovation through the full product life cycle”. It furthermore suggests that this does occur in marketing practice: “Companies often target innovators and early adopters with their product roll-outs”. No distinction is made, however, between the benefits of reaching innovators and early adopters – both are important as the early buyers of a new market offering.

Arnould et al. (2002, p. 600) conclude that innovators should be targeted because they “play a key role in the success of the innovation by spreading the word to other consumers who might be interested in the benefits of the product”. However, they recommend that early adopters should also be targeted for essentially the same reason: “This makes them important to identify since they influence others in their network” (p. 600). This, and the Kotler example, demonstrate the difficulty of differentiating between whether innovators should be targeted more so than early adopters, and they demonstrate inconsistent rationales for the targeting of these groups.

To summarise the argument so far, two main views on what constitutes innovative consumer behaviour exist – those holding that it is time dependent, and those proposing an innate quality of innovativeness (linked to the reliance on interpersonal communications), which may be related to actual adoption time. In practice, most researchers continue to use a simplistic time-based definition of innovators; see, for example, Lockett and Littler (1997) or Frambach et al. (1998). Attempts to measure the concept of innate innovativeness have often been both complicated in their application and confusing in their findings, perhaps explaining this reliance on more simple conceptualisations.
On one level, it could be argued that simply looking at first buyers rather than innate innovators is sensible business practice. First, purchasers might be regarded as a good proxy for “innate” innovators since, if the measure is accurate, it is unlikely that an innately innovative individual would not adopt at a time that is early relatively to the rest of the market. Non-adoption by an innately innovative person would be most likely to occur as a result of what are loosely referred to as “situational factors” not of consumer resistance or innovation unsuitability.

There are also well established links between innate innovativeness and high product-class interest (Dickerson and Gentry, 1983; Taylor, 1977) and high levels of media usage (Summers, 1972; Darden and Reynolds, 1974; Gatignon and Robertson, 1991), which should mean that the number of innate innovators who do not actualise will be very small. The benefits of studying individual adoption behaviour largely revolve around the importance of the innovator as being amongst the first to adopt an innovation – termed “market initiators” by Foxall (1994). It could, therefore, be argued that a time-based definition of innovators is the most relevant to marketing researchers and, more directly, to practitioners.

However, it is self-evident that independent adoption is vital in the early stages of the life cycle of a new product, simply because someone must initiate the word-of-mouth communication. To reach a broad spectrum of the market within a reasonable time frame, this would have to be generated by more than just a handful of individuals. To initiate market adoption, marketing planners need to be able to identify those people most likely to assess the product or service independently (in the absence of word of mouth, presumably on the basis of mass-media input) and tailor appeals to them, so as to ensure they hear about it, adopt it and spread the word to others. Put simply, we cannot predict likely early adopters if all we know about them is that they adopt early.

Both definitions can be seen to have value but, from a marketing management point of view, it is the combination of both early and independent adoption that is vital to the future of the innovation. There seems to be no reason why a definition of innovators cannot include both aspects that theorist have focussed on in the past. They are neither contradictory nor conflicting. Accordingly, innovativeness is defined here as:

... the propensity of an individual to adopt relatively earlier than other members of the social system, and to do so based primarily on non-personal communications.

Whether it is in practice worth measuring both innate innovativeness and actualised innovativeness, and determining the best predictor of each depends on the claimed benefits of doing so, which will next be evaluated.

**The strategic benefits of identifying and targeting innovators**

A disproportionate amount of marketing work has focused on the first adopters of innovations, attempting to uncover their unique characteristics and reveal their motives. The strong focus on the consumers thus classed as “early adopters” (Gatignon and Robertson, 1991) is intuitive, given the supposed importance of their actions to the future of both the innovation and the provider.
The question here is a simple one: are early adopters any more important in the diffusion process than later adopters? Unless there are good reasons, treating them as a distinct group within the rest of consumer society is not justified in a marketing sense. If they are not meaningfully different from other purchasers, a simple factor such as awareness or chance may be the sole driver of adoption time. If those are all that distinguish between early and late adopters, then a mass marketing approach focussed on raising awareness is warranted, to attempt to maximise early adoption rates.

Additionally, it is recognised that all early adopters are not the same. If measured simply in terms of time of adoption, those first adopters will include some who have innovated and others who have imitated. The innovative early adopters, defined here as true “innovators” are a subset of all early adopters, providing distinct benefits to companies who market the products that they adopt. It follows that marketing practitioners need to be able to do more than just identify likely early adopters. They must identify likely independent adopters specifically. Imitative adoption is a function of proximity and/or communication with true innovators, so the identification of those true, independent innovators is the key to influencing the diffusion process.

Critics of market segmentation argue that appealing to one particular segment of the market can often be inefficient (Wright, 1996) or, worse, ineffective (Hammond et al., 1996). Where it is clear one group of consumers will react differently and reward specific targeting, segmentation is sensible, provided it can be done easily and profitably. Nevertheless, criticism of the way the strategy is often approached has been strong:

Before any segmentation effort ... can be justified properly, we need evidence that two key assumptions are true: namely that the segments are associated with a stable set of preferences, and that targeting these segments really does give a higher return than other approaches, such as mass marketing (Wright, 1996, p. 23).

There is enough evidence in the literature to suggest that, when it comes to the adoption of more innovative products, early adopters can be associated with a stable set of preferences (McDonald et al., 2003; Rogers, 2003; Gatignon and Robertson, 1991). Unfortunately, there is no consensus yet about a simple, reliable method of identifying consumer innovators, prior to the launch of an innovation. Some advocated explanations are: “domain specific innovativeness” based on personality theory (Goldsmith and Flynn, 1992); “perceived innovation characteristics” (Tornatsky and Klein, 1982) and “novelty seeking” (Hirschman, 1980), both drawing on perceptual theory; and multi-attribute attitude “theory of planned behaviour” (Harrison et al., 1997). The search for such a method, however, is not justified unless it can be shown that being able to target innovators is likely to be more beneficial than mass marketing initiatives. The following sections identify and critically review the evidence relating to the benefits previously said to be gained from being able to identify and target consumer innovators.

Some of these benefits, of course, flow from all early buyers, not just those who act independently. Obviously, those prone to word-of-mouth influence will not act without some innovators. Not one of these benefits is possible without some independent early buyers, justifying the focus on identifying them.
With innovators being a subset of early adopters (imitators constituting the rest), the benefits can be expressed as shown in Figure 1.

**Early adopters bring cash flow to an organisation**

The importance of the revenue generated by sales to early adopters is frequently asserted (Goldsmith and Flynn, 1992; Gatignon and Robertson, 1985; Nabih et al., 1997).

![Figure 1: Summary of benefits of innovators](image)

**Figure 1: Summary of benefits of innovators**

It is said that, without it, few companies could afford to make the product refinements and fund the marketing efforts required to spread the innovation to the wider community. Increasingly, such companies as Hewlett Packard and Gillette are relying on the success of new product introductions for future growth and immediate profitability (Steenkamp et al., 1999).

Furthermore, retailers and wholesalers would be unlikely to support innovative products for long unless innovative consumers purchased them. The growing power of retailers in most economies means that they are intolerant of slowly moving products, and often require new products to pay subsidies or be heavily supported before taking them on (Berman, 1996; Jones and Ritz, 1991).
Put simply, failure to attract sufficient numbers of buyers in the early stage of the product life cycle puts the organisation under considerable financial stress, and may cause the demise of the innovation solely because it is removed from retail shelves (Gatignon and Robertson, 1991). On the positive side, one research study focussed on innovators, as opposed to all early adopters, found them to be less price sensitive than later buyers (Goldsmith and Newell, 1997). If so, the practice of price skimming makes good sense.

*Early adopters promote the product to others*

Bass (1969) argued that word-of-mouth communications drive the diffusion process, and modelled the process. Innovators adopt early because they are comfortable making decisions on the basis of mass-media communication alone. The vast majority, however, wait for such interpersonal communication as word-of-mouth recommendations or demonstrations, before they decide to adopt. Gatignon and Robertson (1985, p. 849) observed that “individuals have different propensities for relying on mass media or word-of-mouth communications” but contended that “personal influence is the key factor responsible for the speed and shape of the diffusion process”.

Although this is a widely held belief, and is frequently used to justify research into innovators, the evidence is in fact limited, and somewhat mixed. Early research generally supported the notion of innovators as the generators and spreaders of word-of-mouth messages about an innovation (Arndt, 1967; Engel et al., 1969; Baumgarten, 1975). This research stream established the idea that the media sources used by innovators were different from those influencing later buyers, and particularly included media that were high in informational and editorial content. More recently, it has been found that later adopters have more difficulty in determining appropriate evaluative criteria, and therefore look to current users for help (Olshavsky and Spreng, 1996).

If we accept the idea that it is innovators who drive later adoption through their words and actions, a number of important implications follow:

- Unless some consumers adopt the innovation before any word-of-mouth communication exists, and then discuss it with others, diffusion to a wide market is unlikely to occur. Someone must start the interpersonal communication chain. Failure to appeal to innovators means market failure for the innovation under these conditions (Baumgarten, 1975).
- Innovators, through their word-of-mouth promotion on behalf of the product or service, can reduce the cost of marketing promotion later in the life cycle (Feick and Price, 1987; Arndt, 1967). Thus, word-of-mouth communication is vital for companies with risky products or limited promotional funds (Gatignon and Robertson, 1985).
- Innovators reduce the perceived risk for later adopters through their adoption and use of the innovation (Rogers, 2003). Early users contribute to both the observability and trialability of the innovation through their example, and these two factors are positively correlated with increased diffusion speed (Tornatsky and Klein, 1982).
There is a great potential for wasting marketing resources if innovators are not identified. Only a small proportion of potential buyers adopt on the basis of mass-media communication alone. Therefore, initial marketing communication efforts need to target those consumers as accurately as possible and address them directly, assuming that the rest of the audience will be unresponsive until word-of-mouth begins. Being able to tailor the marketing mix to innovators is often cited as the true payoff for this research stream (Bass, 1969; Gatignon and Robertson, 1985; Goldsmith and Flynn, 1992; Foxall, 1994; Argarwal and Prasad, 1998; Rogers, 2003). Communication campaigns targeted at innovators can have the beneficial side effect of building brand awareness and preference amongst a wider audience that happens to notice them. The key strategic aim of mass communication, however, is initially to drive innovators to act, and later encourage repeat purchase (East, 1997).

Despite the popularity and seemingly logical nature of this argument, there is some contrary evidence in the literature. Arndt (1967), who was generally positive about the communicative role of innovators, found that communication was not one-way but took the form of information swapping discussions between current and potential users. This process was not “controlling” with large numbers (46 per cent) of those exposed to positive communications still choosing not to adopt. Labay and Kinnear (1981) also found large groups of consumers with detailed product knowledge, very similar to adopters, who decided not to adopt. The conclusion is that although awareness must precede adoption, those exposed to both word of mouth and mass media may yet still reject or delay adoption of the innovation.

If innovators are vital in spreading word-of-mouth communications, it is to be expected that they will rate highly on opinion leadership scales. This has not consistently been shown to be the case, with some positive results (Baumgarten, 1975) and some negative (Robertson and Myers, 1969). Overall, the relationship has been generally positive, but with many inconclusive findings (Subramanian and Mittelstaedt, 1991). Poorly developed opinion leadership scales have been blamed for these results (Flynn et al., 1996), but these could be read as indicating that many innovators do not communicate the outcomes of their experience with others. The propensity to do so may depend on the innovation itself. Dickerson and Gentry (1983, p. 232) found that innovators in the field of computing were “not interested in the arts or cooking or a great deal of social interaction” while Midgley and Dowling (1993) found fashion innovators to be more socially active.

It has been proposed that some consumers actively distribute information on products across a wide range of categories, and they have been labelled “market mavens” (Feick and Price, 1987; Gladwell, 2005). This US Yiddish colloquialism is roughly equivalent to expert, but it was found that the information distributors in question often had little or no direct experience with the product; they were simply opinion leaders. “Pundit” is perhaps a more accurate translation. Consumers, it appears can be innovators but not necessarily information spreaders, as well as being spreaders of information without actually adopting the products or services to which it relates.

Adding further complexity to the picture, the impact of word-of-mouth has not been shown to be consistent for all innovations. The nature of the innovation plays a role in the amount of influence that word-of-mouth communication has on later adopters (East and Lomax,
2005). Most consumers reduce their reliance on personal sources for continuous innovations (Lambert, 1972), and it has been shown that the level of social involvement in a product decision generally depends on the type of product in question (Witt, 1969; Witt and Bruce, 1972; Bearden and Etzel, 1982).

Reflecting the pro-innovation bias common to much of the research into the adoption process (Rogers, 2003), studies so far have only looked at the role of positive word-of-mouth. It would be more realistic to investigate the impact of both positive and negative messages on later adopters, unless it is assumed that all early adopters have had similarly positive experiences with the innovation. Recent studies of the impact of word-of-mouth communication on brand choice have suggested that negativity is both less frequent and less influential with respect to brand choice (East and Lomax, 2005), but this has not been confirmed in the specific context of innovation.

The “independent innovator” perspective put forward by Bass, despite its numerous adaptations and expansions, has at its core, a simplistic view of the market operation. The view is that the innovation is developed by an organisation, released to a naïve market, promoted by mass media and then by word-of-mouth from early users. Two recent developments complicate this view of the adoption/diffusion process. First, the rise of cross-national media and international travel mean that consumers are often exposed to innovations from abroad, either through the media or first hand, long before they are available in their home market. Secondly, improvements in communication technology, most notably the rise of the internet, have allowed word-of-mouth communication to occur globally and almost instantaneously. The formation of special interest groups means that consumers can access word-of-mouth communications even before the launch of products. The popularity of recent movie-related web sites, which host previews, gossip and reviews up to 12 months before their scheduled release, illustrates the complex nature of new-product related information sources today. The impact of internet-based discussions on product adoption has already been discussed by Sussan (2006). Whereas being well-travelled and well-connected was once the domain of a select few, and a distinguishing characteristic of innovators (Rogers, 2003), those are now characteristics of a much wider sector of society.

In conclusion, the flow of information throughout a market place today is complicated and rapid and, though innovators would still seem to play an important role in communications, their influence may not be as profound as some researchers believe. Early buyers as a whole, though, are responsible for generating word-of-mouth and setting an example for more conservative later buyers.

*Innovators are often heavy users of the product or service category*

The work of Ehrenberg (1988) has consistently shown that brands with a large market share not only attract a large number of customers but also gain a large proportion of each customer's business. Innovators tend to be heavy users of the product class (Taylor, 1977; Summers, 1971), and so account for a large portion of sales themselves, as well as influencing the buying behaviour of others. "Not only are the heavy users early triers, but
their reaction to a new product will be critical because of the potential volume they represent” (Taylor, 1977, p. 106).

Thus, they are an important group to identify, attract and hold. Attracting a large share of their custom is vital to gaining a large market share, and a product or service needs to appeal to heavy users such as innovators to be successful in the long run. This positive finding must be kept in proportion, however, since innovators constitute only a small percentage of the market, as defined by the conventional Rogers figure of around 2.5 per cent. They can therefore have only a limited impact despite their greater than normal usage rates. The finding that those who adopted early had average monthly purchases around 82 per cent higher than later adopters (Taylor, 1977), suggests that innovators alone may account for only a small fraction of overall market sales, and for up to 4 to 5 per cent of sales volume. In most markets, this would not make them a viable segment to target unless there were other benefits.

**Innovators can help to refine an/improve the product or service**

Moore (1991, p. 29) argued that the real value of innovators is that they “appreciate technology for its own sake”. He characterised first purchasers of high-technology innovations as being “techie”. They seek out new things and are tolerant of teething problems, provided they are given the opportunity to help to fix them. Moore suggests that innovators provide companies with “great feedback early in the design cycle and begin building a supporter who will influence buyers” (p. 31). Although his conclusions are based almost exclusively on anecdotes and personal experience, the idea that early users (or “lead users”) improve products, or even find new uses for them, has been well documented (Price and Ridgway, 1983; Urban and von Hippel, 1988; Schreier and Prugl, 2006). In practice, this behaviour is frequently seen to occur in the case of computer software products such as Netscape and Linux (Cochrane, 1999).

**Early adopters contribute to a “market leader” image**

Establishing an image as the market leader is said to be important in convincing the more conservative members of society to adopt an innovation (Moore, 1991). Obviously, a market leadership image cannot develop unless people have adopted and are using the product or service, and it is appropriately distributed. Consumers often use market leadership as a proxy for other criteria, such as quality, when making unfamiliar purchase decisions (Kamins et al., 1999).

Market pioneers have been shown to gain substantial advantages in terms of long-term market share, distribution and awareness. A successful pioneer can erect barriers to entry against later entrants (Gatignon and Robertson, 1991). Successfully identifying and appealing to innovators may then establish the innovation in the market place for the rest of its life cycle. This benefit delivers more than just early sales, positioning the product or service in the market place as the one used by “experts” (as distinct from “mavens” or pundits). Those innovators who use the product early in its life-cycle can form the basis of expertise-based advertising appeals.
Conclusion

Despite innovators often being simplistically described as the first 2.5 per cent in the market place to adopt a new product or service (Rogers, 2003), the characteristic of independent decision-making is of equal importance as the timing of adoption. Those consumers who purchase early and do so purely on their own initiative are the true innovators in any market, and it is they who often determine an innovation's future. Other early buyers, who adopt having benefited from the advice or experience of these innovators, do deliver benefits to the provider, but clearly cannot be expected to enter the market until the independent innovators have.

With such a large number of inconsistent theoretical perspectives and complex but limited evidence, what conclusions can be drawn about innovators and early adopters? There are a number of valid reasons for researching and targeting innovators, though not necessarily as strong as is often claimed. Perhaps, their most obvious and important impact is that they start the diffusion process. If the bulk of consumers need word-of-mouth promotion before they will adopt, someone must initiate this dialogue. Personal views about an innovation are initially generated from within the innovative buying group, and being able to identify those people prior to launch allows companies to improve their chances of encouraging both the adoption process and the subsequent spreading of word-of-mouth messages. Innovators also provide early sales, increasingly critical for product survival, and can help to position a new product as the initial market leader.

Yet there are also reasons to target all potential early adopters, irrespective of their predisposition to be innovative. The large size of this group provides the early “buying mass” that a new market offering needs. They may also help spread word of the new offering to others. Thus, the safest approach at this time is to target both. As the modern “wired world” accelerates the diffusion process, so early adopters have to be targeted quickly. However, because innovators make the earliest moves, companies should target them first and probably hardest. The establishment of “brand communities” should be encouraged, to facilitate the spread of information amongst interested consumers (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Of course, a marketing communications theme that successfully appeals to both groups would be the planner’s ideal.

The theoretical perspectives and existing evidence do not provide a strong answer to the questions if innovators should be especially targeted more heavily than early adopters, or why they should be strongly targeted at all. In this situation, what is urgently needed is more empirical evidence. This will require techniques to identify innovators and early adopters before the launch of an innovative product or service, to measure the extent to which their needs are differentiated, and to test their influence on diffusion to other groups, longitudinally. Rogers (2003) has called a study of this nature the “ideal” research design. Yet it is not easy to implement, and remains to be executed in a marketing context.

To sum up, the safest strategy is to target both innovators and early adopters, but to make sure that innovators are targeted first and, perhaps, most intensively. This should be done in a manner that encourages them to engage in a dialogue with the organisation and other potential consumers. Examples of this include web-based forums and brand communities.
Communications with innovators should reflect the greater product knowledge and interest in the category that truly innovative consumers are likely to have, perhaps by passing on their positive experiences in advertising campaigns. This may require an initial focus on rational appeals, rather than emotional, and heavy expenditure on mass media in the early phases. The marketing communications plan should furthermore facilitate a high level of contact between the innovators in the audience and the company's market intelligence gatherers, by such means as trade shows, multi-media launches or online chat rooms. Broader marketing strategy should also positively encourage innovative consumers to demand the product or service from retailers, thereby generating demand pull in the distribution channel.

Though the diffusion-adoption research stream is at least 45 years old, much work remains to be done. In particular, empirical studies need to investigate more rigorously whether or not innovators and early adopters can be identified pre-launch, if they are looking for different benefits, and what the ongoing benefits to the company are in terms of speeding up the diffusion process or simply making the innovation more visible and acceptable.

References


**Further Reading**


**Corresponding author**

Heath McDonald can be contacted at: heath.mcdonald@deakin.edu.au