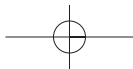
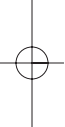
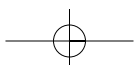
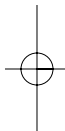
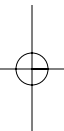
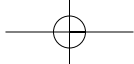


Part One

Connected Marketing Practice





Seed to spread: how seeding trials ignite epidemics of demand

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Picture this: a marketing research department operating as a profit centre, not only generating intellectual capital but also driving sales through word of mouth outreach programmes with opinion leaders. Sounds like a fantasy? Well, think again. Big brands such as Procter & Gamble, 3M, DreamWorks SKG, Microsoft and Google are all harnessing the power of research to optimize product launches. How? Through seeding trials – sampling conducted in the name of research, designed to transform opinion leaders into loyal adopters and word of mouth advocates.

Seeding trials: ‘It’s research, Jim, but not as we know it’

When most people think of marketing research, they tend to think of research rather than marketing. Indeed, marketing research is formally defined as identifying and measuring marketing opportunities and problems, evaluating marketing actions, or monitoring marketing performance.¹

But there is a new breed of research that is putting the marketing back into marketing research: seeding trials. Seeding trials involve targeted sampling with opinion leaders, conducted in the name of research.

4 Connected Marketing Practice

Rather than simply offer free samples, previews, test-drives, etc. to opinion leaders, the idea behind seeding trials is to create goodwill, loyalty and advocacy by putting the product or service in their hands *and* giving them a say in how it is marketed. By involving opinion leaders in this way, by effectively inviting them to become part of your marketing department, you create a powerful sense of ownership among the 10% of your target clients, customers, or consumers who have the power to ignite word of mouth demand. By transforming these opinion leaders into word of mouth advocates through seeding trials, companies are using marketing research to ignite word of mouth networks and accelerate sales. As Star Trek's Dr McCoy might have said: 'It's research, Jim, but not as we know it.'

Seeding trials in action: Post-it Notes

The power of seeding trials in transforming the fortunes of a brand is no better illustrated than through the intriguing history of Post-it Notes, the little yellow stickies from the office supplies company 3M. The story started in 1968, when 3M asked one of its researchers, Dr Spence Silver, to develop a new super-sticky adhesive. Unfortunately Dr Silver failed, and did so quite spectacularly. What he came up with was super-weak glue that wouldn't stay stuck. Consigned to the back shelves of 3M's R&D lab for six years, the fruits of the failed innovation project were virtually forgotten.

Then on one Sunday in 1974, Art Fry, a new product development researcher for 3M, had a 'Eureka' moment while cursing scrap paper bookmarks that kept falling out of his church choir hymnal. Perhaps the un-sticky glue could be used to make bookmarks? The idea of Post-it Notes was born. Unfortunately, when this concept of temporary sticky paper bookmarks was tested in research, it bombed. Nobody could see a use for them. However, and despite 'kill the programme' calls from management, Fry convinced 3M to run a limited test launch of Post-it Notes. Unfortunately, that failed too. Post-it Notes were doomed.

Before pulling the plug on the whole sad affair, 3M decided to run a seeding trial with opinion leaders in its target market - a sampling initiative conducted in the name of research. The company identified secretaries to CEOs in large companies all across America as opinion leaders for office supply products, and sent them boxes of Post-it Notes, inviting them to come up with ideas for how the little yellow stickies could be used. The seeding trial generated goodwill and advocacy from these opinion-leading secretaries who - flattered by the invitation to be involved in the development and commercialization of a new product - were transformed into

Seed to spread: how seeding trials ignite epidemics of demand 5

Post-it Notes brand champions. The 'useless' Post-it Notes soon started appearing on memos, desks, diaries, drafts, reports and correspondence, and spread like an infectious rash through and between companies. The rest is, as they say, history. Post-it Notes had been saved by a seeding trial, transformed from failure to a multi-million dollar and highly profitable brand by a group of opinion-leading secretaries.²

The science bit: why seeding trials drive demand

Why did a seeding trial, targeted sampling conducted in the name of research, transform the fortunes of Post-it Notes? To answer this question, we need to understand two things: first, a peculiar psychological phenomenon known as the Hawthorne Effect; and second, the critical role of opinion leaders in driving sales.

The Hawthorne Effect

Back in the 1930s, a team of researchers from the Harvard Business School were commissioned to run some employee research for the telecom giant Western Electric (now Lucent Technologies). Conducted at the company's production plant in Hawthorne, near Chicago, the research programme involved inviting small groups of employees to trial various new working conditions before rolling them out to the general workforce. To the researchers' amazement, the participants seemed to like whatever was trialled, to such an extent that their productivity increased! For example, when researchers invited participants to trial working in brighter lighting conditions, productivity increased. But then when they trialled dimmer lighting conditions, productivity also increased. In fact, productivity kept increasing in successive trials of working under progressively dimmer lights, until the lighting was no stronger than moonlight! In another trial, the research participants were invited to test working shorter hours, and sure enough their productivity increased again. Indeed, subsequent trials showed that the more breaks the research participants were given and the less time they worked, the greater their productivity. But then, when the researchers asked them to trial longer hours, productivity went up again - to an all-time high.³

When taken together, the results of the various Hawthorne studies showed that whatever the researchers asked participants to discuss and trial resulted in an increase in productivity. The team of Harvard researchers, led by Elton Mayo, realized that their results had nothing to do with what was being trialled and everything to do with running

6 Connected Marketing Practice

research trials. By singling out a small group of employees to participate in an exclusive trial, participants felt valued, special and important. The special attention they received gratified their ego and created a positive emotional bond with what they were trialling. The practical upshot was that the research trials effectively transformed the research participants into advocates for whatever it was they were trialling. A series of further trials found this phenomenon to be more or less systematic, and the research team coined the term 'The Hawthorne Effect' to describe the goodwill and advocacy that research trials generate among research participants.

The Hawthorne Effect: how to win friends and influence people

If the psychology of the Hawthorne Effect all seems a bit abstract, try it for yourself and see how powerful it is. The next time you want something from someone (a salary increase, a date, or whatever), first do some 'research' with them by asking them for their advice on some matter. It doesn't actually matter what it is that you ask them their advice on; the important thing is to be seen to be listening to what they have to say, and then to tell them that you appreciate their opinion.

Then, simply ask them for whatever it is you want from them. The chances are that your 'research' will have triggered the Hawthorne Effect and you will get what you want. By asking them for their opinion you will have not only created goodwill but also flattered their ego. At a subconscious level, they will feel indebted to you. This psychological indebtedness makes them significantly more likely to agree to whatever it is you are asking of them.

By seeing the Hawthorne Effect in action, you'll realize that it is a very powerful influence technique; you'll also know to watch out the next time someone asks you for your advice and then asks you for something!

It is this Hawthorne Effect, harnessed by seeding trials, that transforms opinion leaders into loyal adopters and powerful word of mouth advocates. By turning opinion-leading target buyers into product or service evangelists using the Hawthorne Effect, a brand can create a powerful volunteer sales force.

The truth about opinion leaders

Simply by finding and reaching those few special people who hold so much social power, we can shape the course of social epidemics . . . Look at the world around you . . . With the slightest push - in the right place - it can be tipped . . . (Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*).⁴

With the possible exception of Tom Peters's *Thriving on Chaos*,⁵ *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell is perhaps the most influential and widely read book to date on the power of word of mouth. Voted by Forbes as one of the most influential business books of the past two decades, this international bestseller uses the science of social epidemics (runaway word of mouth) to outline a simple three-point formula for how word of mouth hits happen: 'the Law of the Few', 'the Stickiness Factor' and 'the Power of Context'. While the Stickiness Factor and the Power of Context deal with the 'what' and the 'where' of word of mouth (having something intrinsically worth talking about, in an environment conducive to word of mouth spread), the Law of the Few addresses the 'who', reminding us that the opinions of 10% of any target market will drive the buying behaviour of the other 90%.

Although Gladwell uses the language and jargon of epidemiology to unpack the concept of opinion leadership, the idea behind the Law of the Few is an established business truth dating back to the 1940s. Indeed, evidence for the Law of the Few was first produced in a 1940 landmark study on media influence conducted by Columbia University.⁶ The research found, contrary to what might be expected, that mass-media messages do not directly influence the mass market but instead influence a small minority of individuals who then influence their peers through word of mouth. The researchers coined a new term for these hubs of word of mouth mediating mass-media messages - 'opinion leaders' - proposing a new 'two-step flow' model of media influence to replace the discredited 'magic bullet' or 'hypodermic needle' model of direct media influence.

Since the discovery of opinion leaders, research across just about every product and service category has found that the opinions of an opinion-leading 10% do indeed tend to shape the opinions and purchases of the opinion-following 90%.⁷ Opinion leaders, simply defined as target buyers who frequently offer or are elicited for category-related advice by their peers, can include high-profile industry experts, journalists, reviewers and media celebrities. However, the vast majority of opinion leaders in any target market are simply regular clients, customers, or consumers, except for the fact that they have a peculiar 'connected and respected' profile - they are highly connected hubs of word of mouth in their social networks with opinions that are respected by their peers.

8 Connected Marketing Practice

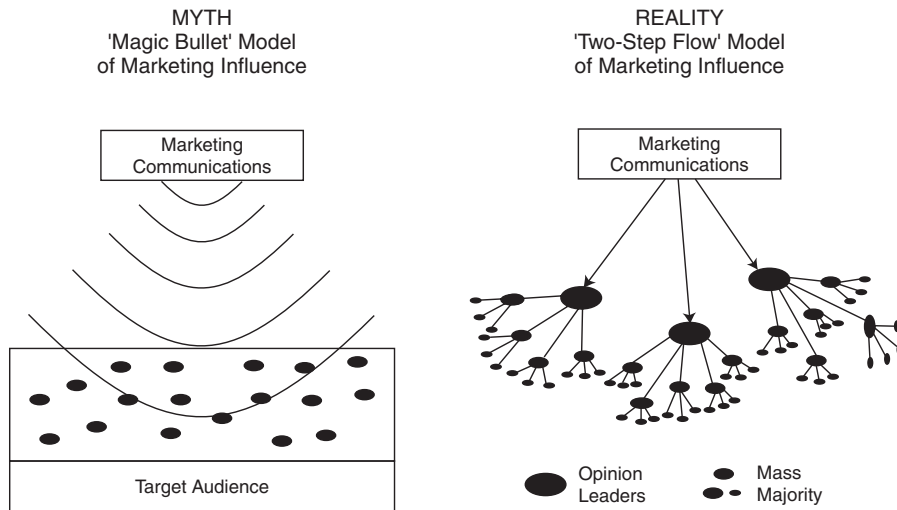


Figure 1.1 Models of media influence

Thus, the influence of opinion leaders derives not from media appearances but from what sociometricians call 'network centrality' – they are word of mouth hubs, who connect everybody to everybody by six degrees of separation, and in doing so connect businesses to their target markets.

Because of the importance of opinion leaders in driving sales, a good deal of time has been invested in (a) finding ways to identify them and (b) among marketing agencies at least, re-branding them with some proprietary label ('Alphas', 'Hubs', 'Connectors', 'Influentials'^(SM), 'Sneezers', etc.). While some subtle differences may lie behind the proprietary spin and various trademarked labels, it is worth remembering that the scientifically validated and peer-reviewed scales for identifying this group are called opinion leadership scales – precisely because they screen for opinion leadership (i.e. likelihood of this group's offering or having elicited from them, category-related advice).⁸

What we know about opinion leaders, apart from their connected and respected profile, is that opinion leadership tends to be category-specific – opinion leaders in off-road quad-bikes may or may not be opinion leaders in cosmetic beauty products. We also know that key correlates of opinion leadership are 'category involvement' (interest, knowledge and activity) and 'strength of personality' (persuasiveness and personal charisma). These correlates have enabled reliable opinion leadership scales to be developed and validated in order to be used by businesses for screening existing and target buyers.

The opinion leader screener

Opinion leaders are simply those target buyers in your market who are likely to frequently offer or be elicited for category-related advice. The self-designation technique for identifying opinion leaders involves asking existing and potential buyers to fill out a short opinion leadership screening questionnaire:

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

(1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. My friends/neighbours consider me a good source of advice about [category]
2. I tend to talk a lot about [category] to friends/neighbours
3. In the past 6 months, I've talked to a lot of people about [category]
4. When asked for advice about [category], I offer a lot of information
5. When discussing [category] products, I usually convince them of my opinion

Source: Adapted from H. Ben Miled and P. Le Louarn (1994) Analyse comparative de deux échelles de mesure du leadership d'opinion : validité et interprétation. *Recherches et Applications en Marketing*, 9(4): 23–51

How to find opinion leaders in your target market

To identify the opinion-leading 10% who drive sales in your target market, a number of practical solutions have been developed: 'self-designation', 'professional activity', 'digital trace', 'key informants' and 'sociometry'.

1. **Self-designation:** Asking existing or prospective buyers to fill out a short self-completion questionnaire that screens them for opinion leadership status. For example, Procter & Gamble use a self-designation questionnaire on their website at www.tremor.com to recruit opinion-leading teens into seeding trials. Although this technique is open to self-reporting bias (people tend to overestimate their opinion leadership), it has been validated and found to be reliable.
2. **Professional activity:** Using the job title of target clients, customers, or consumers as an indicator of opinion leadership status. Jobs that

10 Connected Marketing Practice

suggest category involvement, a capacity to spread the word and to influence peers by word of mouth are predictive of opinion leader status. For example, just as 3M identified secretaries to CEOs as opinion leaders in office stationery products, Ford identified opinion leaders for its new Focus model as PAs to celebrities.⁹ Although this approach may be less scientific than the self-designation approach, it is a quick, easy and cost-effective solution to identifying opinion leaders.

3. **Digital trace:** Identifying opinion leaders through an online search on category-relevant blogs, websites, discussion lists, newsgroups and web forums. For example, Siemens mobile identified opinion leaders to participate in a seeding trial of one of its new phones using an Internet search of popular online user review forums.¹⁰ In an era where opinions are increasingly shared online, the digital trace left by that activity provides businesses with a fast and smart method for opinion leader identification.
4. **Key informants:** Asking a limited number of people assumed to be knowledgeable about the patterns of word of mouth influence who they would designate as opinion leaders. Although this technique is ideally suited to identifying opinion leaders in small markets or in individual organizations, it was used by games manufacturer Hasbro to identify young opinion leaders for its handheld electronic game POX, in 2001. Market researchers headed off to video arcades, skate parks and playgrounds and went up to young boys aged 8-13 asking 'Who's the coolest kid you know?' When they got a name from the young 'informant', the researchers went in search of this cool kid to ask him the same question, in order to continue up the local hierarchy of kid-cool until someone finally answered 'Me!' Once they had identified an opinion leader, the researchers invited the 'Alpha Pup' (as they called them) to participate in an exclusive seeding trial for which they would be rewarded with 10 new pre-release POX units to share with friends.¹¹
5. **Sociometry:** Actually mapping the patterns of word of mouth influence in a target market in order to identify hubs of influence. Costly and time-intensive, the use of sociometric techniques is mostly limited to mapping influence networks in organizations for change management purposes.

From principles to practice: learning from drug dealers

Seeding trials – targeted sampling with opinion leaders conducted in the name of research – drive sales because they trigger the Hawthorne Effect amongst the 10% of a target market whose opinions drive word of mouth

Seed to spread: how seeding trials ignite epidemics of demand ■■

demand. As a launch optimization tool, seeding trials have been extensively used in the drug industry to transform opinion-leading physicians into loyal adopters and powerful word of mouth advocates of new prescription medicines. So established are seeding trials in the healthcare sector that they have their own industry standard codename: Phase IV trials.

Phase IV trials get their name from the way new drugs are researched in the pharmaceutical industry. Research begins with Phase I trials, which involve testing the new product for safety, usually in a small number (10–100) of healthy people. If the drug is found to be safe, then Phase II trials begin, which involve testing how effective the drug is in doing what it is supposed to do in a slightly larger number of people (100–300) who are actually suffering from the condition the drug is designed to treat. If all goes according to plan, then the product goes into large-scale Phase III trials with many sufferers (300–3000), in order to measure the comparative efficacy of the new drug against other treatments, its side-effect profile and its relative financial value over alternative therapies. Only when these three phases of research are satisfactorily completed can the new drug be cleared for launch by market authorities. But it is at this point, when the drug has been finally cleared for launch, that a fourth phase of non-regulatory research often takes place: Phase IV trials.

Phase IV trials are targeted sampling initiatives with opinion leaders conducted in the name of research. They involve inviting a group of opinion-leading physicians to participate in a trial of a new drug by prescribing it to a certain number of patients and feeding back on their experience. In return for their participation, the doctors are often promised free access to the drug for their patients, as well as additional exclusive information and services to help them use the drug effectively. It's a win-win situation for both the physician and the drug manufacturer. The physicians get their status as opinion leaders reinforced through privileged access to the new products and special VIP services, and they may often receive some financial remuneration for taking part in the trial. For the drug company commissioning the trial, valuable information is captured from influential lead-prescribers, and the powerful Hawthorne Effect is triggered, transforming trial participants into opinion-leading, word of mouth advocates.

Going Google over seeding trials

In the software industry, seeding trials with opinion leaders go under a different name: 'beta testing'. The practice, however, is identical: targeted sampling with opinion leaders conducted in the name of research. The

12 Connected Marketing Practice

goal of beta testing is to get opinion leaders to trial a pre-release version of software (a 'beta version') in order to (a) capture feedback on any glitches that need to be ironed out and (b) trigger the Hawthorne Effect and transform participating opinion leaders into loyal word of mouth advocates for the new software. This combination of offering opinion leaders a sneak preview, removing the cost barrier to trial, and engaging them in research dialogue is a powerful combination that can drive sales.

For example, to optimize the Windows 95 launch, Microsoft ran a massive seeding trial with 450 000 opinion-leading PC users in the US. A total of 5% of Microsoft's entire target market in the US participated in the trial, each receiving a pre-release sample copy of the software. By connecting with opinion-leading target buyers through research dialogue instead of advertising monologue, the seeding trial generated goodwill and an army of product advocates. When Windows 95 was launched on the stroke of midnight on 24 August 1995, the seeding trial paid off handsomely: one million copies were sold in the first four days, making it the fastest-selling software of all time, trouncing the previous record of 40 days to sell a million copies.¹²

As in the healthcare sector, seeding trials have become a widely used solution for optimizing product launches in the software industry. A recent high-profile example was the seeding trial used to launch Internet company Google's new email service Gmail. In March 2004, 1000 online opinion leaders were invited to sample a beta version of the new service in the name of research. To enhance the word of mouth potential of this seeding trial, Google enabled participants to invite their friends into the trial, who could also invite their friends if they signed up and so on. This 'snowball' or 'viral' recruitment enhanced the Hawthorne Effect, stimulating the transformation of goodwill and ownership of participants into active word of mouth advocacy.

The result was an exponentially increasing number of Gmail evangelists, each recruiting new users with the fervour of religious converts. Driven by the cachet of being invited as an opinion leader to have an exclusive sneak preview of a yet-to-be-released product, and by having a say in how that product was to be commercialized, the Gmail seeding trial generated a reported three million Gmail adopters and advocates in just three months with no advertising spend.¹³ Indeed, the seeding trial created so much word of mouth demand that people were prepared to pay to become participants: an online black market emerged on the Internet with invitations being sold for up to US\$200.¹⁴ By playing the scarcity card - people value things more when availability is restricted - the invitation-only policy for participation in the Gmail seeding trial resulted in a word of mouth frenzy. Dozens of blogs were

set up by participants to share their experiences as Gmail 'insiders' with wannabe research participants, and the mainstream mass media, including *The New York Times*, ran stories on the seeding trial.¹⁵ Through a seeding research trial alone, Gmail became one of the most high-profile and well-known email services in the world, getting as many mentions on the Web as its far more established (and heavily advertised) competitor, Yahoo! Mail.¹⁶

Teen trials – Tremor style

Although seeding trials are extensively used in the IT and healthcare industries, the most audacious use of sampling opinion leaders in the name of research has come from the consumer packaged goods sector. In 2001, brand giant Procter & Gamble (P&G) (owner of Crest, Clairol, Pringles, Pampers, Tide, CoverGirl, Max Factor, Olay, Hugo Boss fragrances and others) began recruiting teen opinion leaders into a nationwide online seeding trial panel, codenamed Tremor, which now has over 250 000 members – a full 1% of the US teen population.¹⁷ Recruited by word of mouth and banner advertising on popular teen websites, potential Tremor panel members are promised exclusive pre-launch samples and previews of new products from P&G, and to have a say in how these products are marketed. Screened for opinion-leading status with a simple online screener (only one in ten applicants are invited to become part of the 'Tremor crew'),¹⁸ panel members participate in sampling initiatives conducted in the name of research for a wide variety of innovations including beauty products, music, movies, videos and gadgets.

By giving opinion-leading teens a voice in how new products are commercialized, the Tremor panel creates a sense of ownership and involvement, triggers the Hawthorne Effect and transforms panel members into loyal adopters and vocal word of mouth advocates. Tremor seeding trials have included inviting panel members to:

- Help develop Vanilla Coke's 'Nothing Else Like It' billboard campaign and come up with intriguing messages to appear on promotional heat-sensitive cans¹⁹
- Vote on launching Snoop Dogg's new line of shoes²⁰
- Advise on the trailer for the movie *Biker Boyz*²¹
- Choose which Herbal Essence commercial to air for promoting Fruit Fusions Tropical Showers range²²
- Recommend which fashion model to use in a Pantene commercial²³
- Select backing music for a Pringles advertisement²⁴

14 Connected Marketing Practice

- Pick models for a body-spray calendar²⁵
- Help design the new Crest Spinbrush²⁶
- Vote on a t-shirt design for Vans 'Warped Tour' concert²⁷
- Name the DreamWorks SKG movie *Eurotrip*²⁸
- Choose the logo for the teen movie *Win a Date with Tad Hamilton!* 29

The key to success in these seeding trials has been to combine 'Get it first' targeted sampling with an 'Inside scoop' of exclusive information about the product for participants to share with their friends, and what could be called a 'VIP vote' (very *influential* person) that enables the participant to influence how the product will be promoted.³⁰ The impact of *involving* opinion-leading teens through 'VIP votes', 'Get it first sampling' and 'Inside scoops' is illustrated by the way Caitlin Jones, a Tremor panel participant, reacted when she saw a trailer for a movie she had been consulted on with her friends: 'Oh, my God, I voted for that logo!' she exclaimed. 'So they do listen. It does matter.' The opinion-leading teen was instantly transformed into an active evangelist and set about organizing group outings to see the movie.³¹

As a launch optimization tool, Tremor seeding trials can reportedly generate a 10–30% increase in sales or audiences, measured against a control region where the panel is not used.³² For example, when the panel was used to optimize the launch of a new line of CoverGirl Outlast Lipcolor lipstick, sales were on average 14% higher than in a matched control region. Each Tremor participant evangelized about the lipstick to on average nine friends, six of whom said they intended to buy the product. In the words of Tremor chief executive Ted Woehrlé on panel participants: 'We offer them the inside scoop and influence [i.e. a say in how the product is promoted]. If you get the right 1%, you have the critical mass required to make a difference.'³³

In another Tremor initiative designed to measure the effectiveness of the seeding panel, 2100 Tremor opinion leaders from Phoenix were invited to get involved with the launch of a new malt-flavoured milk product from Shamrock Farms, a dairy foods producer. As a result, sales in Phoenix outperformed those in a matched control city, Tucson, and 23 weeks later sales were still 18% higher in Phoenix.³⁴ In a similar test, Tremor panellists were sent a partial script of an upcoming TV show, and this resulted in a jump in viewing ratings of 171%.³⁵

The Tremor seeding initiatives' effectiveness in boosting sales has had third-party brands – including Sony, Toyota, AOL, Warner Brothers, Verizon, and Kraft – queuing up to harness the Tremor seeding trial panel as a launch optimization tool.³⁶ For instance, the music label EMI Group has retained Tremor and intends to sample panel members with new albums – in the name of research – by asking the opinion-leading

teens to vote on which tracks should be promoted on video channels and radio programmes.³⁷ This is a simple but psychologically smart way of using the panel to harness the Hawthorne Effect and create advocates. In an era where teens are turning away or turned off by interruptive mass-media marketing, Tremor offers businesses a turnkey solution for harnessing the oldest and most powerful media of all: people media. Although P&G does not publish revenue data for its opinion-leading Tremor panel, the predicted income from third-party brands using the panel in 2004 was US\$12 million, with the number of campaigns up 30% over 2003.³⁸ Whatever the numbers behind Tremor, P&G believes the panel to be so effective that it warrants being replicated; in 2005 the company began recruiting a second Tremor seeding panel in the US, twice the size of the original one, made up of 500 000 mothers ('Tremor Moms').³⁹

Seeding trials unlimited

While P&G's Tremor seeding panels may represent one of the most systematic uses of targeted sampling in the name of research, P&G is not alone in pioneering this technique. For example, New Line Cinema invited fans of JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* epic fantasy novel to advise on the film of the book. By giving fans a say in the film production, the Hawthorne Effect was triggered and an army of word of mouth advocates was created.⁴⁰ Similarly, the marketing company BrandPort uses its panel of advertising aficionados to seed new advertising campaigns. Panel members are sent previews of new advertising campaigns and asked to comment on them.⁴¹ Again, the involvement generated by research dialogue cues goodwill and ownership – increasing the likelihood the panel member will adopt and advocate the advertised brand.

More generally, when sportswear brands such as Nike and Reebok offer opinion-leading trendsetters free pairs of their latest sneakers, it is not just to capture feedback from cool kids but also to kick-start word of mouth advocacy.⁴² By putting the new product in their hands, or rather on their feet, in the spirit of partnership and in the name of research, the Hawthorne Effect is cued and vocal evangelists are created. Likewise, when Pepsi ran an opinion leader outreach trial with 4000 American teenagers in 2001, it wasn't just to find out what they thought of their new soda, Code Red, but also to amplify and accelerate word of mouth advocacy.⁴³ The Pepsi opinion leader outreach programme was so successful at driving sales for Code Red that Pepsi decided to pull its planned TV advertising campaign. Similarly, when Unilever asked 250 fashion-forward urban girls to participate in a pre-launch seeding

16 Connected Marketing Practice

trial of the Max Azria BCBGirl fragrance in Canada,⁴⁴ it wasn't just to find out what they thought of the perfume; it was to harness the Hawthorne Effect and drive demand. By giving each of the participants not only a full bottle to trial themselves, but also 100 samples each to hand out to friends, Unilever created a volunteer sales force that ensured the fragrance was a best-seller in cities where the research was conducted.

Driving sales with seeding trials: 10-point checklist

There is no single formula for optimizing launches and boosting sales using seeding trials that transform opinion leaders into word of mouth advocates. However, the following checklist covers off the key questions that you need to ask yourself when planning a seeding trial.

The right product

- 1 Are we offering something new?* Opinion leaders like to lead with their opinions, so seeding trials work best, that is, they drive sales, when the product or service you are bringing to market is genuinely new and different. Old, generic, or commodity products and services with nothing new to say are unlikely to benefit from seeding trials because people only tend to talk about the new and surprising.
- 2 Are we offering something better?* Seeding trials will accelerate your sales if the product or service seeded delivers a superior experience. While the Hawthorne Effect will initially transform opinion leaders into advocates, the advocacy will be short-lived if your product or service is substandard or disappointing. This doesn't mean your product or service has to be groundbreaking, outrageous, or revolutionary for seeding trials to optimize a product launch - some of the most successful seeding trials have involved frozen pizza, canned soda and bath soap. What you do need however is a unique selling point that clients, customers and consumers can articulate to each other.
- 3 Are we offering something that can be sampled?* Seeding trials are targeted sampling initiatives conducted in the name of research, so they necessarily involve sampling (credible advocacy can only come from first-hand experience). For many products and services, offering opinion leaders some kind of free limited trial, sample, download, or preview may be relatively straightforward, especially if sampling is a widespread practice in your sector. However, you may have to be more creative if your product or service doesn't lend itself so easily to trial - as can be the case for certain high-value, low-margin

products such as some technology products or perishable goods such as fresh or frozen foods. If this is the case, try and think of novel ways in which you can set up your trial to nevertheless get your product into the hands of opinion leaders (in the name of research): in-store or at-office trials, trials at hotels, conferences or trade shows, trials using redeemable gift certificates or vouchers, special loans or screenings, etc. If you really cannot enable opinion leaders to trial your product or service, you could still enable them to trial the product 'virtually' by viewing it and seeing it in action online.

The right people

- 4 *Have we identified our opinion-leading target buyers?* Seeding trials are all about influencing the influencers in your target market, i.e. influencing the opinion-leading target buyers who frequently offer and are elicited for category-related advice. So run a brainstorming session to generate a list of people in your target market who would make good 'connected and respected' advocates for your product or service. Think in terms of individual profile - jobs, place of work, leisure activities and club membership - and in terms of networks - what are the big and visible organizational and social networks in your target market, such as employers, associations, interest groups, etc.? The important thing is to be creative, and not stop at the usual suspects when looking for opinion-leading target buyers: experts, celebrities, journalists, bloggers and reviewers. Instead, think of who could be effective word of mouth hubs in your market. For example, PAs, club secretaries, beauty therapists, health and fitness instructors, bar staff and hairdressers are popular choices for seeding consumer goods. Don't forget that investors, employees and satisfied clients, customers or consumers can also make for opinion-leading advocates because they have product experience or a stake in your success.
- 5 *Are we seeding to enough opinion leaders?* Opinion leaders make up 10% of your target market, and successful seeding trials will seed up to 10% of these opinion leaders, i.e. up to 1% of your entire target market. Seeding trials on such a scale may be prohibitively expensive, especially in the consumer packaged goods markets, but you do need a minimum critical mass of Hawthorne-Effect-enhanced opinion leaders advocating your product or service for an appreciable sales uplift. While this number will vary according to the size of your market, a useful rule of thumb is to seed to a minimum of 250 opinion leaders per major urban centre.

18 Connected Marketing Practice

6 *How are we going to deliver the trial experience?* Once you have identified opinion leaders to invite into the seeding trial, you have to solve the logistics challenge of how to get the product or service into their hands as cost-effectively as possible. Downloads via the Internet, by post, by courier, by hand, or by pick-up from a convenient location such as a store, hotel, or mall? Contact a handful of sales promotion agencies or specialist sampling companies for advice on what they would recommend as the most cost-effective and logistically simple approach for you. The advice will cost you nothing and may include some creative solutions you might have missed.

The right action

- 7 *Does our seeding trial involve exclusive 'Get it first' sampling?* Seeding trials, targeted sampling initiatives with opinion leaders, work best when they enable participants to get their hands on new products and services first – before everyone else. If your seeding trial offers participants an exclusive sneak preview, the sales-driving effect will be optimized because you increase the word of mouth potential. If pre-launch seeding is not possible, then think of ways that you can combine targeted sampling with 'Get it first' access to other services, promotions, or even new advertising. The more trial participants feel like VIPs, with exclusive and priority access to what you have to offer, the more they will advocate. Finally, think of participants not only as clients, customers, or consumers, but as the means to getting more clients, customers, or consumers. What can you seed with the product that will help participants spread the word: discounts, vouchers, promotional gifts, branded merchandise, or special invitations to share with friends, or even further samples to hand out?
- 8 *'VIP Vote': are we giving seeding trial participants a say in our marketing?* Seeding trials work because they elicit participant advice on how your product or service is marketed. This creates a sense of ownership, loyalty and goodwill that, through the Hawthorne Effect, triggers adoption and advocacy. In practice, giving participants a say in your product or service need only involve a simple online vote on options for a campaign poster, logo, display stand, advertising concept or promotion. Of course, you can go further and involve trial participants in the packaging and design of the product or service itself. For example, the Australian beer Blowfly was built ground-up by research participants through online voting – on all aspects of the

product ranging from bottle design to brand logo (see Chapter 4: Brewing buzz, p. 59). The key is to keep everything as simple as possible in order to minimize the work for the trial participants. The goal is to make opinion leaders feel they have contributed to your innovation or how it is marketed – without them having to do anything more than a couple of mouse clicks, which is why simple voting between options works better than lengthy discussions, questionnaires, or surveys.

- 9 *Does our seeding trial offer participants an 'Inside scoop'?* Seeding trials work because they make participating opinion leaders feel like 'insiders', that they have the 'inside story' on your product or service. What information can you share with them to reinforce the impression that they have a special relationship with you? For example, can you give them a 'behind the scenes' experience, provide them with insider guides, gossip or stories, or give them privileged access to company discussions, blogs, or marketing materials? Some companies, such as Unilever, go so far as to print personal branded contact cards for seeding trial participants to reinforce the impression that they are indeed insiders⁴⁵ (see Chapter 3: Creating brand advocates, p. 47).

Measurement

- 10 *Have we put in place a mechanism for measuring the effectiveness of our seeding trial?* Ultimately, seeding trials are a sales acceleration tool, and they stand or fall on the sales uplift they produce. To measure your trial's impact on sales, you can do as P&G do and use a 'control' region or group, where the trial is not run, and measure differential sales performance. This may be fine for measuring offline sales, but for measuring the effect on online sales you might need to provide trial participants with a pass-it-on promotional discount code to forward to friends, who forward it to friends, etc., enabling you to track the number of online sales the seeding trial generates. Of course, there are other softer measures you can use, such as the effect of the trial in increasing awareness levels. To do this, it suffices to include an online dimension to your trial, such as a special website, blog, or discussion list and measure the number of visitors it receives. Alternatively or additionally you can measure the number of column inches in online and traditional press, that your trial generates, and calculate the reach of those column inches. Finally, you can also track the effectiveness of the seeding trial using a simple pre- and post-trial poll that measures changes in advocacy rates among trial participants and within your broader target market.

Conclusion: seeding trials as super-charged sampling

When all is said and done, seeding trials are just sampling initiatives on steroids. Not only do seeding trials accelerate sales by removing the cost barrier to trial among the key opinion-leading 10% of your target market, but they also harness the Hawthorne Effect, transforming participants into loyal adopters and vocal word of mouth advocates. While sampling ('tryvertising,' as it has recently been re-branded),⁴⁶ offers a first-hand brand experience and is the preferred promotional activity of opinion leaders,⁴⁷ seeding trials offer something much more powerful: brand *involvement*. Seeding trials - targeted sampling in the name of research - enable businesses to connect and collaborate with opinion leaders, market *with* them, rather than at them. And by creating a volunteer sales force, seeding trials are a scalable, predictable and measurable solution for driving the one thing known to drive business growth: word of mouth advocacy.⁴⁸

Takeaway points

- Seeding trials with opinion leaders are an effective launch optimization strategy that can enhance sales by 10–30%.
- Seeding trials involve targeted sampling initiatives with opinion leaders conducted in the name of research.
- Seeding trials work by transforming opinion leaders into loyal adopters and vocal word of mouth advocates, and do so by harnessing a powerful psychological phenomenon called the Hawthorne Effect.
- Through 'Get it first' sampling, 'Inside scoops' and 'VIP votes', seeding trials generate goodwill, involvement and advocacy among opinion-leading clients, customers or consumers.
- Companies using seeding trials to optimize product launches and drive sales include Procter & Gamble, Microsoft, Hasbro, Google, Unilever, Pepsi, Coke, 3M, Ford, Dreamworks SKG, EMI, Sony and Siemens.

Notes and references

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22 Connected Marketing Practice

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