

A RESEARCH NOTE ON MARKET MAVENS AND THE DISSEMINATION OF POSITIVE VERSUS NEGATIVE MARKETPLACE INFORMATION

KENNETH C. SCHNEIDER, *St. Cloud State University*
WILLIAM C. RODGERS, *St. Cloud State University*

Market mavens are consumers who acquire knowledge and expertise about local marketplace conditions and, therefore, are of special interest to retail managers who, it is expected, might find mavens an efficient conduit through which to communicate messages to the market. The purpose of this study was to examine mavens' information provision tendencies with respect to positive versus negative marketplace information. From a sample of 280 adult women, it was concluded that (1) mavens more often share positive information and negative information than nonmavens, and (2) all consumers more often share positive than negative information, but market mavens are no more or less likely to do so than nonmavens. The article then discusses implications for retailers.

INTRODUCTION

Webster's Unabridged New 20th Century Dictionary defines a maven as "an expert, a connoisseur, especially a self-proclaimed one." In applying the term to certain types of consumers, Feick and Price (1987) coined the phrase "market maven", defined as:

... individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information. (page 85)

In their seminal discussion of market mavens, Feick and Price (1987) go on to 1) describe the construct in considerable detail, 2) present and validate a scale for identifying mavens, and 3) present and test several propositions about mavens. As a consequence of their efforts, the market maven now represents a new "player" in the arena of interpersonal influence.

There is a key difference between the concept of the market maven and previous constructs dealing with interpersonal influence (notably, opinion leaders and

innovators/early adopters); a difference that makes the market maven notion particularly well suited to retail applications. Researchers have long argued that opinion leadership and early adoption are both product specific (see, for example, Montgomery and Silk 1971, Myers and Robertson 1972). So, while the neighborhood opinion leader on vegetable gardening might also be so on lawn care, he/she would not necessarily be an opinion leader on, say, consumer electronics. Or, while the coworker who is an early adopter of business attire might also be so of sportswear, he/she would not necessarily be an early adopter of, say, housewares.

Such limited spheres of influence present problems to the retail manager hoping to use interpersonal influencers to reach a broader audience. While most manufacturers and some specialty retailers (e.g., ski shops, women's apparel shops, pet stores) can concentrate on opinion leaders and/or innovators in one particular product category, many retailers stock widely diversified merchandise lines. In addition to those officially categorized as general merchandise outlets (department stores, discounters, and mass merchandisers), many other retail store types are characterized by scrambled merchandising (e.g., drug stores that sell china and groceries, supermarkets with floral and wine departments, lawn and garden stores offering artificial Christmas trees, lights and decorations to balance seasonality, and so on). Should these stores attempt to use opinion leaders or early adopters as conduits to reach a wider market, several (possibly, numerous)

The Journal of Marketing Management
Volume 3, Issue 2, pages 67-72
Copyright © 1993, The Midwest Marketing Association
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved

distinct sets of opinion leaders and/or innovators would be involved, one set for each merchandise line stocked. Such a marketing program would be terribly inefficient and, probably, prohibitively expensive.

Market mavens, however, constitute a source of interpersonal influence that transcends specific product categories. This important distinction between market mavens and other types of interpersonal influence, and its importance to retailers, was recognized by those who first studied market mavens. To wit:

The general influence of the market mavens makes them particularly attractive promotional targets for retailers who carry many products and wish to convey information to the public about sales, low prices, product variety and other aspects of store operations in addition to information on specific products. It is unlikely that early purchasers and opinion leaders would provide much promotional leverage in delivering such a broad range of information to the public. (Slama and Williams 1990, page 48)

Although opinion leaders are important sources for consumers seeking information directly related to a specific product category, they may not be as important to retailers... Many retailers carry large assortments of a broad array of products, and consumers are concerned not only about individual products but also about general store characteristics and policies that make up its image. (Higie, Feick and Price 1987, page 264)

Market mavens, then, are an important target for retail communications, especially for retailers with diversified merchandise lines. Such retailers would find market mavens, with their more generalized knowledge of marketplace information, a more efficient group through which to communicate with other consumers. The goal of this study is to extend our understanding of the type of retail marketplace information these so called market mavens tend to provide to others.

SPECIFIC RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Among other issues (see, for example, Lichtenstein and Burton (1990) and Price, Feick and Guskey-Federouch (1988)), research concerning market mavens has focused on the extensiveness of the information providing tendency of mavens. In their original study of market mavens, Feick and Price (1987) asked some 1,500 male and female household heads, "How often do you provide other people with specific information

in each of the following categories?" They then went on to list either four food or four health and beauty aid products. In both cases, there was a significant correlation between score on the market maven scale and frequency of information provision.

Notice that the original study queried consumers about information provision regarding specific products, and not generalized marketplace information. In another report, the same research team more directly investigated general marketplace information. Specifically, Higie, Feick and Price (1987) asked 303 adults how often they "tell someone about" each of seven dimensions of store image (e.g., merchandise quality, usual prices, employee helpfulness, etc.) for each of three store types (department, discount and grocery stores). In this study, the authors found significant differences in the frequency of marketplace information provision by market maven status for each of the twenty-one conditions (seven store image characteristics times three store types). Finally, Slama and Williams (1990) asked 306 married couples to "rate how often you tell others about" twenty-one items, fourteen of which were product specific and seven of which were more generalized marketplace information items (e.g., sales, store personnel, prices, etc.). Again, market maven status was found to be directly related to extent of information provision.

In discussing their findings, Slama and Williams (1990, page 52) noted that "little is known about whether market mavens provide negative as well as positive information about the marketplace." Indeed, none of the cited studies differentiated between positive and negative information provision. Thus, while we now know that market mavens tend more often than non-mavens to discuss store personnel with others, we do not yet know if mavens more frequently discuss pleasant versus unpleasant encounters with employees. Similarly, while we know that mavens tend more often to discuss store price levels, we do not yet know if they more frequently discuss high priced stores or low priced stores.

These distinctions are material to retail managers. If market mavens are especially likely to disseminate positive information, then the retailer needs to make use of this communications conduit by getting the "good" word out directly to market mavens. Doing so represents a tremendous opportunity to leverage promotional dollars. Similarly, if market mavens are especially likely to disseminate negative information, retailers need to 1) continuously monitor the state of mavens' discontent relative to that store, and 2) be

especially careful that mavens do not form (or at least retain for long) negative impressions concerning the store. So, the tasks needed to manage the information flowing through mavens are somewhat different for positive versus negative types of information.

The purpose of this research, then, is to examine differences in information provision tendencies by market maven status between positive and negative marketplace information. Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

OBJ1: To determine whether market mavens are more likely to provide positive marketplace information to other consumers than are nonmavens.

OBJ2: To determine whether market mavens are more likely to provide negative marketplace information to other consumers than are nonmavens.

OBJ3: To determine whether (and how) the difference in the information provision between market mavens and nonmavens differs for positive versus negative marketplace information.

METHODOLOGY

Market Maven Measure

Market maven status was measured with the six item market maven scale developed by Feick and Price (1987). Items in this scale were administered with seven point, Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) responses, yielding a possible range of scores from a low of 6.0 (minimum market maven status) to a high of 42.0 (maximum market maven status).

Information Provision Measures

Extent of information provision was measured with scales especially constructed for this study. For each type of information (positive versus negative), six item scales were developed to measure the extent of marketplace information provision. Each scale contained three direct and three reverse scored items, and sampled a variety of possible marketplace experiences. Items in both scales were administered with seven point, Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) responses, yielding a possible range of scores from a low of 6.0 (minimum information

provision) to a high of 42.0 (maximum information provision).

[Note that, while not specifically addressed in this study, market mavens could disseminate another type of information; one that is essentially neutral in wording (e.g., "There is a new restaurant at the mall," "I stopped at (Store X's) spring sale yesterday," and so on). The positive or negative value connotation of such messages would be clear only in the full context of wording, tone and body language. However, because it was not possible to incorporate tone and body language in this study, it was necessary to cast all statements as clearly positive or clearly negative by wording alone.)]

The resulting positive information provision (INFOPOS) and negative information provision (INFONEG) scales are summarized by central tendencies and standard deviation. The INFOPOS scale had a mean response of 32.8 and a standard deviation of 5.5, while the INFONEG scale had a mean response of 31.1 and a standard deviation of 6.0.

The scales demonstrated a reasonable degree of internal consistency. Coefficient alpha was .77 for INFOPOS and .72 for INFONEG. In addition, item to total correlations were consistently above .40 for both scales. Thus, it was concluded that the scales are capable of providing reliable measures of the extent of positive and negative marketplace information provision.

Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were collected as part of a 10-page questionnaire covering a variety of consumer behavior issues. The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 280 adult women between 18 and 64 years of age. The sample was restricted to adult women for two reasons. First, restricting the sample to one gender at least slightly simplified an otherwise cumbersome selection procedure. Second, and more important, restricting the sample to only women enhanced the chances of locating market mavens, who, based on previous studies (see, for example, Higie, Feick and Price (1987)), have been found more likely to be female.

A somewhat unique method that essentially yielded a quota sample of women in the desired age range was used to select participants for the study. Student "recruiters" hired for this project were contracted to provide names of adult women acquaintances (friends,

relatives, coworkers, neighbors, etc.) in the appropriate age range in multiples of six names, with each group of six distributed according to prespecified quotas. Students were also expected to make personal contact by phone or mail with each potential participant to describe the study and insure participation by that individual.

Each "recruiter" took part in an extensive training session that provided him/her with instructions on how to approach potential participants and on how to respond to questions so that all participants would have the same information about the nature and purpose of the study. Participants were not compensated for taking part in the study (other than with whatever psychic income they might derive as a result of doing a favor for someone they knew), but "recruiters" were paid \$30 for each group of six questionnaires.

In order to secure a reasonably diverse sample, a fairly large number of "recruiters" was sought. Students were not particularly encouraged to (but were allowed to) contract for more than one group of six participants. In total, 37 "recruiters" were involved in the study, with 28 contracting for one group of six participants, seven contracting for two groups, and two contracting for three groups. Of this initial sample size of 288 adult women, completed questionnaires were ultimately obtained from 280.

Since the sampling process was not probability based, it was deemed necessary to introduce selected constraints on the selection process to insure representation across at least some key demographic variables, very much in the tradition of quota sampling. Within each block of six participants, quotas were established with respect to age (three younger than 40 years of age, three 40 years of age or older), marital status (at least three married), family relationship (no more than two living in the same household), and student status (no more than one student, and the "recruiter" was excluded from participating).

In addition, spot checks of postmarks for the fifty percent or so of questionnaires that were returned by mail showed considerable geographic dispersion. Not only was the mid-sized, upper midwest MSA (and its surrounding area) in which the authors' university is located well represented, but so also was one of the nation's fifteen largest SMSAs located some seventy miles away, as well as numerous smaller towns, some located several hundred miles away. Clearly, this two-stage distribution procedure succeeded in reaching a wide geographic area.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The extent of both positive and negative marketplace information provision was closely related to market maven status. Participants' scores on the market maven scale correlated $+0.470$ ($p < .001$) with INFOPOS and $+0.468$ ($p < .001$) with INFONEG.

To see this relationship more clearly, participants were divided into three approximately equal sized groups based on the magnitude of their market maven scale scores. Information provision scores were then contrasted across the low, midrange and high market maven status group, as follows:

	Market Maven Status			p-values for One Way ANOVAs
	Low	Mid	High	
INFOPOS Mean Score	29.7	33.0	35.4	< .001
INFONEG Mean Score	28.1	30.9	34.0	< .001

As seen in these data, mean INFOPOS and INFONEG scores significantly increased across groups of increasing market maven status. These results strongly suggest that market mavens are more likely to provide both positive and negative retail marketplace information to other consumers than are nonmavens.

Thus, the findings of previous researchers that market maven status is directly related to extent of information provision are supported by the results of this study. In addition, it is apparently the case that this propensity of market mavens to provide information to other consumers transcends both positive marketplace information, that retailers would like widely disseminated, as well as negative marketplace information, that retailers would just as soon not be widely dispersed, at least not when it concerns their own operation.

Finally, what of the relative difference between positive and negative information provision? If one defines $\text{INFODIFF} = \text{INFOPOS} - \text{INFONEG}$ as the difference between a participant's positive and negative information provision scale scores, the resulting mean difference is $+1.7$. Using a traditional t-test for the difference between two means using matched samples, it is found that consumers in general tend to disseminate significantly (if modestly) more positive than negative information ($t^* = 5.85$, $p < .001$).

As was done earlier for INFOPOS and INFONEG, these INFODIFF scores can be contrasted across the

low, midrange and high market maven status groups, as follows:

	Market Maven Status			p-value for One Way ANOVA
	Low	Mid	High	
INFOPOS-INFONEG				
= INFODIFF Mean Score	+1.6	+2.2	+1.4	n.s.

Based on these data, there does not appear to be a significant difference in the propensity to share positive versus negative marketplace information with others on the basis of market maven status; market mavens are not especially more likely to share one or the other type of information than are nonmavens. Thus, while all consumers are slightly more prone to share positive than negative information, this tendency does not vary significantly by market maven status.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results of this study, it is possible to at least tentatively add the following to our collective knowledge concerning market mavens:

1. Market mavens are more likely to disseminate positive marketplace information than are nonmavens.
2. Market mavens are also more likely to disseminate negative marketplace information than are nonmavens.
3. Consumers are more likely (but only modestly so) to provide positive than negative marketplace information. Market mavens are no more or less likely than nonmavens to do so.

Before discussing the implications of the findings, several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the generalizability of the study is limited due to the nature of the sampling process utilized. While the quota controls insured representation across at least some demographic variables, the sample was nonetheless concentrated on one gender, in one state, and with unknown selection bias across other variables, particularly socioeconomic ones. For this reason alone, replication with other sample groups is advised. Second, the study is silent on the contribution of tone and body language in determining how marketplace messages are received and decoded by the recipient. Finally, it would be useful to see if these findings can be replicated in an experimental context, wherein

previously identified mavens and nonmavens might be subjected to positive or negative marketplace experiences as part of an experimental manipulation, and later observed as to the type and detail of information disseminated to other consumers or, possibly, cohorts of the researcher.

While tentative, the preceding conclusions are potentially useful to all marketing managers, and especially to information managers in retail organizations. Retail store managers, advertising directors, and the like ought be heartened to learn of the existence of a group of consumers who have the potential to exert influence over other consumers through their marketplace expertise, and who are quite willing to share positive marketplace information with other consumers.

Having identified a segment of consumers in the relevant geographic area as market mavens, those consumers could be used to leverage communications budgets for disseminating information relative to new stores, grand openings or relocations, special sales, competitive prices or values, merchandise quality and/or selection, or whatever. Because of their role as information conduits, market mavens would also seem to be especially attractive targets for retail store catalogs or other direct mail pieces, preferred customer programs, store sponsored charge accounts, and whatever else might serve to keep mavens better informed concerning store policies, practices and promotions. In other words, market mavens represent an innovative new approach to managing word-of-mouth communications in a retail setting.

On the downside, market mavens have not been linked strongly to any particular demographic profile. While the present study did not track demographic information, previous studies have found only that market mavens are more likely to be female than male (see Feick and Price (1987), Higie, Feick and Price (1987)).

While a distinctive demographic profile would ease the burden of finding and communicating with market mavens, uncovering one is not absolutely essential. Researchers might find it more fruitful to turn their attention to other possible characteristics indigenous to market mavens. Perhaps there are personality traits that sharply differ between mavens and nonmavens. Perhaps mavens differ from nonmavens in terms of important media habits. Perhaps there are substantive behavioral differences that can be tapped. As to the last possibility, Price, Feick and Guskey-Frederouch (1988) found that mavens are heavier users of coupons than nonmavens. Armed with that knowledge, retailers

might find it possible to incorporate relevant store information into coupon offers, with the intent that mavens will be more apt to seek out those coupons and, hence, become exposed to the desired message. Further, mailing lists generated from coupon redemptions or other responses to such promotions enables the retailer to communicate with these market mavens, though admittedly not exclusively. Clearly, we still know very little about who these mavens are, or how they behave. Perhaps the most fruitful course for future research regarding market mavens would be in uncovering ways to directly identify and correspond with market mavens, short of administering a measurement scale to every customer who comes in the store.

Finally, a caveat for retail managers desiring to make use of the word-of-mouth capabilities of market mavens is in order. Just as market mavens are unusually well-suited to spread the good news about one or another

retail organization, so also are they capable of exacerbating the harm caused by negative information, for they are also more likely than nonmavens to share that sort of information with others. Like positive information, harmful information is of many types; inventory stockouts (especially, chronic ones), rude, discourteous or incompetent sales consultants, noncompetitive prices, billing errors, poor complaint handling, problems with confusing layouts or cleanliness, or whatever else might cause customers to revise downward their opinions of the store. Like positive information, negative information is likely to spread more quickly when placed in the hands of market mavens. Consequently, those in charge of damage control for the store would be well advised to make sure that market mavens do not find cause to think poorly of the store or, when that is not possible, to make sure those negative opinions are short-lived.

REFERENCES

- Feick, Lawrence F. and Linda L. Price (1987), "The Market Maven: A Diffuser of Marketplace Information," *Journal of Marketing*, 51 (January), 83-97.
- Higie, Robin A., Lawrence F. Feick and Linda L. Price (1987), "Types and Amount of Word-of-Mouth Communications About Retailers," *Journal of Retailing*, 63 (Fall), 260-278.
- Lichtenstein, Donald R. and Scot Burton (1990), "An Assessment of the Moderating Effects of Market Mavenism and Value Consciousness On Price-Quality Perception Accuracy," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, 17, Association for Consumer Research, 53-59.
- Montgomery, David B. and Alvin J. Silk (1971), "Clusters of Consumer Interests and Opinion Leaders' Spheres of Influence," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 8 (August), 317-321.
- Myers, James H. and Thomas S. Robertson (1972), "Dimensions of Opinion Leadership," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 9 (February), 41-46.
- Price, Linda L., Lawrence F. Feick and Audrey Guskey-Federouch (1988), "Couponing Behaviors of the Market Maven: Profile of a Super Couponer," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, 15, Association for Consumer Research, 354-359.
- Slama, Mark E. and Terrel G. Williams (1990), "Generalization of the Market Maven's Information Provision Tendency Across Product Categories," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, 17, Association for Consumer Research, 48-52.
-

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kenneth C. Schneider (Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is Professor of Marketing and Marketing Research at St. Cloud State University.

William C. Rodgers (Ph.D., University of Iowa) is Professor of Marketing and Consumer Behavior at St. Cloud State University.