Who Gives The Most Trusted Recommendations?

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â€œPeople like meâ€• vs. the experts

Social media has put power in the hands of the consumer, giving everyone a publishing platform to push out their thoughts and feelings to the world at large. This has given great power to word-of-mouth, typically considered the most trustworthy form of marketing.

But social behavior is changing as it matures.

The GlobalWebIndex â€œAnnual Report 2011,â€• which includes data from Trendstream and Lightspeed Research, outlines a shift in consumer behavior on social media. As usage of social sites increases around the world, the landscape is maturing.

According to the report, usage is shifting to focus on distributing content rather than creating it. Social media users disseminate and share professionally created content more often on microblogs, social networks and video-sharing platforms.

But the human element remains key to engendering trust. Internet users worldwide reported a nearly 50% increase in their trust of social network contacts giving product recommendations, and a 21% increase for microblog contacts.

Even though many of those contacts are likely sharing some professional content with or alongside their personal recommendations, professional sources of information like newspapers and TV barely gained any trust over the same period.

But Edelmanâ€™s â€œTrust Barometerâ€• report for 2011 shows, for the second year in a row, an apparent decline in trust of a â€œperson like meâ€• (from 47% in 2009 to 43% in 2011) and a concomitant rise in trust for experts.

That survey polled college-educated consumers ages 25 to 64 who are in the top 25% of household income relative to age group in their home country and who follow business news and public policy.

The opinions of such an affluent, highly educated, highly informed group cannot be extended to the general population.

Further, Edelman asked about trust in â€œinformation about a company,â€• a different query than product or brand recommendations.

The inclusion of answer choices like â€œa financial or industry analystâ€• or â€œgovernment officialâ€• orients the question mo toward investor than consumer issues.

Other research tends to support the traditional view that word-of-mouth from friends, family and other peers is still the most trustworthy way of getting information about products and services. Teen influencers told Ketchum in May that friends with their top source of information.

The importance and trustworthiness of customer reviews has grown, especially when shoppers feel they are authentic peer opinions. And social media users say dialogue and comment quality are key to trust on social sites.

Theyâ€™re also even more likely than the average consumer to place trust in friend and family product recommendations.

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