**Social Media Influence on Consumer Behaviour**

As we've all probably experienced through the past number of years, social media has and will continue to alter how groups influence consumer behaviour. In ever increasing numbers, consumers are turning to online sources during the information search phase of their decision making process. This means that the influencers within various social media channels can potentially have a significant impact on consumer behaviour without having any contact with the individuals they influence.

If utilized correctly, marketers have an opportunity to develop a significant amount of influence on consumer behaviour through social media channels. Alas, all too often marketers run head on into social media without having a solid [social media strategy](http://www.socialconversations.com/strategy/) and end up run over and kicked to the curb. The results, as you can imagine, are pretty painful to witness.

If they were to start slowly, however, they could build momentum and eventually find themselves at the front of the pack leading the way and exerting their influence on those who followed.

To get to the front of the pack, a marketer must understand the impact of groups on consumer behaviour. There are three reference groups consumers are either part of, or aspire to be part of, that relate to how a marketer should approach social media engagement.

* **Primary Group:** A reference group that an individual has frequent contact with and whom they turn to as a key influencer during a decision making process.
* **Secondary Group:** A reference group that an individual has limited contact with but will turn to as a reference during certain decision making processes.
* **Aspiration Group:** A reference group that an individual has no contact with but has a positive attraction to and often will make a purchase decision based on what they believe the aspiration group would recommend.

A marketer who is engaging in social media needs to understand where they currently fit and where they need to get to have the influence they desire within the different reference groups. They may already be experts in their field, but they're just a new voice to the members of the various groups.

So what can a marketer do to gain influencer status? The following steps can help.

* **Determine where communities are located:** Understanding where the products, services, or related conversations that are of interest to a marketer are taking place within social media channels and communities is the key first step.
* **Determine which groups/communities are appropriate Aspiration Groups:** This takes in-depth analysis of the various channels and communities to determine which contain the aspiration groups that have the greatest long-term potential for the marketer.

A marketer's aspiration groups will vary from how a consumer views an aspiration group. A marketer will aspire to be part of a group that exerts influence and thought leadership on topics related to the marketer's products or services. They likely won't be influenced in the same fashion that a consumer would be influenced by their aspiration group, but instead will aspire to gain expert status within the group and begin to influence the views of the group.

A marketer will, however, have the chance to absorb the opinions of the group to allow them to hone their marketing message and take into account the needs and desires of the groups.
* **Become a new member:** Once the aspiration groups have been identified, it's time to become a member. With online social media channels it's significantly easier to join an aspiration group. Joining is the easy part; gaining the trust and respect of the group takes time.

If executed correctly, over time a marketer can become part of a continually increasing number of consumers' secondary reference groups, but being only part of secondary reference groups isn't the desired goal.
* **Establish yourself as an expert**: The ultimate goal is to grow the number of consumers who consider the marketer part of their primary reference group. This is the ultimate prize, but it doesn't come easy. It takes hard work and dedication to build a strong reputation and become a member who consumers turn to as an expert to influence their decision making process.

Before trying to go out and establish themselves as an expert who has a wide network of consumers who consider them to be part of their primary or secondary reference group, a marketer should be aware of two key points.

* Always identify who you are and who you represent.
* Always understand the dynamics of the groups and communities before trying to participate.

Being transparent will go a long way in helping to prevent a marketer from getting run over and kicked to the curb by the groups or communities, and with hard work and dedication could lead to the desired goal of being an established expert with influence over consumer behaviour.