



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **The Maven; Nevermore.**

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What is the life cycle of a maven consumer? To address this important topic we venture into the world of the maven raver.

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## The Maven; Nevermore

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### ABSTRACT

Maven consumers are widely recognized in both academic and industry circles as critical in driving both brand and product success (Chelminski and Coulter 2007; Stockburger-Sauer and Hoyer 2009; Walsh, Gwinner and Swanson 2004). This is none moreso than for new or modified products just as they are entering the market. This importance has led to an intense research focus regarding the individual behavior and motivations of mavens to behave as social leaders, and to be adherents to particular products or brands (Brancaleone and Gountas 2006; Feick and Price 1987; Hazelwood, Lawson and Aitken 2009). What is troubling about this research is that it has not readily addressed the effect of time on the behavior of mavens. The use of mavens within an integrated marketing plan must be sustainable for any long-term benefits to be realized. Any relationships formed with mavens by a marketing practitioner must be able to be continued, but how the behavior of maven's changes through time is not clearly understood. In particular, it is not well understood how consumers become and cease to be maven's.

This paper addresses this gap in the literature by examining the life cycle of maven consumers. We conceptualize a maven as being a person with special knowledge or experience; an expert in a specific field rather than a general "market maven" who knows a lot about a range of products and services (Capon 2007; Grassl and Harris 2010). We also differentiate mavens from opinion leaders, whose motivations are more social and status oriented in nature (Chelminski and Coulter 2007). Highly centralized and experienced consumers acting as mavens within the Sydney rave community are investigated. The rave community was chosen as the focus of this research because of the highly diverse membership and social structures it contains. In addition, the rave community has numerous products and brands that have been integrated into the culture of the community, with numerous cycles of introduction and decline (Day 1981; Goulding and Shankar 2004). With the presence of both a suitable social dynamic and a dynamic product environment this particular community offers the opportunity to generalize to other communities in which mavens operate.

In-depth interviews were undertaken using a co-creationist approach to knowledge creation. The co-creationist approach involved a peer interviewing technique in which junior researchers with close ties to the music community were recruited to interview rave community members (Silverman 2006). These junior researchers brought unique insights and knowledge about music communities due to their own close ties to music culture. During interviews they acted as peers with the data collected becoming a balance of the general knowledge of the junior researchers and the specific knowledge of the informants. This balance of general and specific knowledge allowed for a much greater exploration of the rave community and the experiences of the maven informants. The trust engendered by this peer as interviewer technique also ensured that informants felt comfortable detailing a full range of their experiences. This was felt particularly necessary as the rave community often uses illegal behavior to obtain venues and run parties or 'raves' (Elliott, Watson and Harries 2002). In total 12 in-depth interviews were conducted, of which two exemplary cases have been selected for analysis here. This method ensured that extensive insight was gained into the phases a maven goes through from market novice to full maven and beyond

The analysis of the data identified a number of distinct phases in the life cycle of maven consumers. The stages of the maven life cycle are: (1) initial social inclusion, where the consumer enters a brand community through relational bonds but has yet to rise to become a maven; (2) being a punter, during which the consumer gains acceptance and integrates into the community; (3) leading the social group, where the consumer starts to emerge as a maven by becoming a dominant social figure, directing and organizing people in the community; (4) leading the phenomenon, during which the maven starts to emphasize being a leader of the culture, protecting and nurturing their cultural tastes, rather than leading the specific people in the community; (5) phenomenon drift, where the maven now focuses almost exclusively on the cultural phenomenon without regard for the people in the community, exploring both directly related *and parallel* components to the culture; and (6) shifting, the eventual move of the maven to a new

community that allows them to reflect their newly evolved cultural tastes, with the maven viewing this as reaching their 'maturity'. Each of these stages allows us to understand how a maven evolves from being an ordinary consumer, to being a maven, to finally ceasing to be a maven by absconding from the original community from which they held influence.

The main motivational bases for mavens' advancement from one stage in their life cycle to the next are the needs for socialization and control. In early stages the need for socialization is most critical as it establishes the social bonds needed for group cohesion. No social structure could emerge without some cohesive element in the community. By the third stage of the life cycle however, this need for socialization starts to be moderated by the need for control. The newly emerging maven seeks control over their social environment, and thus takes a leadership role within the community. In the fourth phase the need for socialization begins to decline as it is further dominated by the need for control. In this stage, this need for control is now extended to include not just control over the social aspects of the community but to controlling the cultural aspects of the phenomenon binding the community together, in this case the rave culture. This new type of control sees the maven examining what 'rave' culture is and what it is not, not just organizing the people within the rave community. As the need for socialization continues to decrease and the need of control continues to increase, the social bonds with the original community begin to break down. The now former maven starts to investigate parallel communities that allow them to better understand and explore their cultural tastes, giving them maximum control of their now personal experiences of the phenomenon.

This competing role of socialization and control in the maven life cycle offers a considerable departure from the literatures that examine social and control processes. Previous literature has largely only examined how social groups exert control over individuals. That literature often focuses on how social groups correct the dysfunctional, and sometimes criminal, behavior of the individual through socially mandated acts of control or restriction (Warner, Beck and Ohmer 2010). Our research finds that the reverse process is also relevant. Individuals can seek control over their social group, particularly when they have status, as a maven does. Ironically, our findings also suggest that such exertions of control can lead the maven to eventually become disconnected from the

community, removing an important element of the social structure, and perhaps undermining community functioning.

The implication of this evolutionary process for new products and brands just entering the market is explored. For a manager wishing to build and maintain a relationship with mavens within their target market there must be planning in place for the eventual 'shifting' of the maven. The manager must be prepared to either shift with the maven to new communities or seek new mavens to maintain their contract with the target community. Shifting behavior can present a considerable opportunity for managers hoping to expand into new markets. Managers can leverage the relationships they have with existing mavens, and use their shifting behavior to reach into new markets that the mavens shift to. This can complement market expansion plans and offer a gateway into new consumer communities that are still relevant to the cultural values that the manager is seeking to associate the product or brand with.

In contrast to shifting with the maven the manager may wish to simply maintain contact with mavens relevant to their single target community. This research highlights that managers need processes in place to identify new mavens, as present mavens are likely to evolve out of their dominant social role in the present community. By understanding the stages in the maven life cycle, and the role that the need for socialization and control has in driving a maven's progression through that life cycle, the next generation of mavens can be identified so that long-term access to the target community can be maintained.

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