

# Citizen Marketers — When People are the Message

By Ben McConnell and Jackie Huba  
Kaplan Publishing, 2007

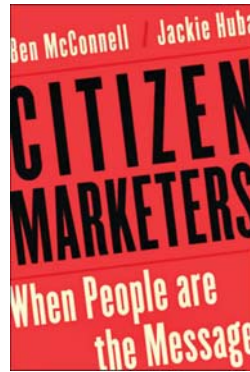
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**C***itizen Marketers* opens with the story of George Masters, a California schoolteacher who, in his spare time over five months, created a little bit of video that was (in effect) an ad for the Apple iPod. The slick retro animation featured iPods dancing to the beat of “Tiny Machine,” a song by an ’80s pop band called the Darling Buds. Masters showed his creation to a few Mac enthusiasts to see what they thought. They went wild. They showed the video to their friends, and within a month, a half million people had watched it.

For decades, television has been a dominant force in shaping our culture with one-way communication. Today’s consumers have a voice, too. Broadband connections combined with user-generated media — blogs, podcasts, videos and other free and readily available tools — are creating a new kind of democratic marketplace. Ordinary people, fueled by passion but with no formal connection to a company, use Web 2.0 social media to shape public perception of products and services.

Most of us are consumers, not producers, of this information. Citizen marketers, the ones who shape opinion, are actually a small percentage of the customer base. These are the “1 percenters” — “filters, fanatics, facilitators and firecrackers,” as authors Ben McConnell and Jackie Huba describe them. These volunteers are driven by their own enthusiasm and a sense of duty to contribute to collective knowledge of the products and services they seek to promote. The 1 percenters contribute by posting news items and delivering rants on their blogs and their websites. They can help create a “community” around a product. The 1 percenters are the ones who launch internet “memes” (the kind of video of which Masters’ “Tiny Machine” is a high-end example). These leap from brain to brain at electronic speed.

The 1 percenters are the early adopters and are critical to the success of an online community. They are by no means the average customer, but they have huge influence over their audience’s perception of a brand.



*Citizen Marketers* is a book about the emerging power of these individuals and online communities to shape culture and consumer preferences. The book is short, snappy and rich in well-researched anecdotes and examples. It has 32 pages of references that provide pointers

on some of the best examples and analysis of social media. This book would be a particularly valuable read for someone who wants to understand the dynamics of social media and how to work with it for marketing and brand building.

The final chapter, “How to Democratize Your Business,” offers intriguing examples of new businesses that have rocketed to success by knowing how to swim in this new stream. One of the examples is Threadless.com, a T-shirt manufacturer, which went from inception to a \$20 million company by involving customers in its decision-making. Forty percent of its business is from repeat customers. Every day, 150 people post design ideas for new T-shirts, and visitors vote on their favorite. All data contributed on each design is shown: the number of people who have participated, the number of days left for voting and the number of comments people have written. Every week, Threadless produces a limited edition of the winning designs, using the rating data as a way to gauge inventory. This system has worked well for the company: 90 percent of all the T-shirts it produces sell out within two months.

Threadless rewards people who submit winning designs with up to \$12,500, a year’s supply of free limited-edition T-shirts and store credit. Threadless offers customers incentives for posting pictures of themselves wearing Threadless designs. Threadless has found success by structuring customer interactions so people can “act in their own self-interest on behalf of the company,” as owners Jake Nickell and Jake DeHart put it. “Allow your content to be created by the community. Put your project in their hands. Let your community grow itself, then reward them for making your project possible.”

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# The New Influencers: A Marketer's Guide to the New Social Media

By Paul Gillin, Quill Driver Books, 2007

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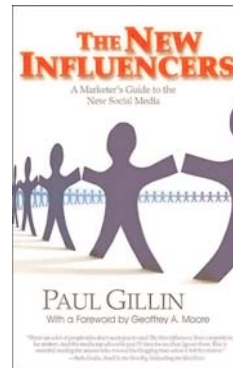
**P**aul Gillin describes marketing as the art of establishing relationships with customers.

In this book, he explores how social media offer unprecedented opportunities for developing the type of discourse that will lead to deeper insights into customer thinking and needs. Up until now, media conglomerates have been able to carefully control message and image because of the high cost of producing and distributing media. The driving forces behind the explosion in social media are bandwidth and an abundance of free and powerful communication tools.

As Gillin tells it, the new social media are far from being a free-for-all. Gillin describes their emerging social structure and code of ethics: honesty, openness and willingness to credit sources and avoid plagiarism. The transparency ethic of new social media dictates that a post can never be deleted but may be modified. Commenting and linking to a posting are essential parts of the conversation and community development. Gillin describes linking as the “currency” of the blogosphere because the popularity of individual bloggers is measured by the number of links to their own postings.

This is a medium of young adults, the 18- to 28-year-olds who are wired for multitasking and who spend an average of 10 hours a week online (but only 2 hours with traditional media such as radio and TV). A recent Forrester report cited that this group is 50 percent more likely to send IMs, twice as likely to read blogs and three times as likely to use social-network sites such as MySpace.

Like *Citizen Marketers*, *The New Influencers* devotes quite a bit of attention to defining the group that gives the book its title. In general, the influencers are extremely knowledgeable about their field of interest. They have market knowledge and a desire to share their knowledge with others. In a general way, they care deeply about their community. Bloggers, for instance,



are motivated by numerous forces: a need to express their views on subjects they care deeply about, to document their experiences, to connect with people who share a common interest and,

sometimes, to achieve fame and status within their community. But they are not in it for the money.

This book provides valuable information on how to participate successfully in the most common forms of social media. In his chapter on the “Tools of the Trade,” Gillin offers a very understandable overview of technologies and techniques such as viral marketing, RSS, wikis, tagging, podcasting and aggregation engines. He offers tips on getting started (“Just jump in ... Be offbeat ... Start a diary ... Accompany postings with audio and images”). He provides perspective through spotlight interviews with leading figures in technology such as Dan Bricklin (creator of VisiCalc, the first spreadsheet program available for personal computers).

Gillin traces how small and large corporations use blogs to expand their business. J.D. Iles of SignsNeverSleep of Lincoln, NH, spends 15 minutes a day blogging about the finer points of how he handcrafts signs. “The weblog shows my customers what we are: a small business that is approachable and fun, and hopefully they like the work we do.” Stormhoek, a South African wine producer, doubled its sales in England after sending free bottles of wine to 150 bloggers. It invited bloggers to organize dinners where Stormhoek provided the wine.

Large companies such as IBM and Benetton have launched successful blogs because they are upfront about the blog’s intent — to promote the company’s business. If done right, blogs work well for big companies because they have the means to create compelling content to keep people coming back. They provide a direct communication route between company executives and customers.

*The New Influencers* tells you what you need to know to jump in, build your image as a thought leader and leverage social media to talk directly with your customers. 📖