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Mums on the net should be the focus of those carrying out market research as it turns out that the old word-of-mouth benefits to sales are stronger than ever now that the school gathering places, shops and mother and child groups have been augmented by online social networks aimed at mothers. That's the conclusion of a research paper to be published in the International Journal of Web Based Communities.

Marketing expert Raechel Johns of the University of Canberra and educationalist Rebecca English of Queensland University of Technology Kelvin Grove, Australia, explain how mothers represent a large segment of marketing dollars. They point out that there is limited research so far aimed at understanding the evolution of the family, mothers' groups and the advent of online meeting places for those with children and money to spend. Their survey of mothers and quantitative analysis of the available online data suggest that mothers discuss products a lot. Moreover, they found that, "trust between mothers is generally high and mothers tend to trust the opinions of other mothers when they recommend a product."

In some cases, the team found, mothers were passively absorbing information, but more often than not they were proactive in seeking opinions about particular products. Fundamentally, the maternal consumers were willing to buy products that offer their family a clear benefit but were dissatisfied when the purchase turned out to be useless or of low-quality, the active seeking of word-of-mouth opinions would thus point to a desire to avoid this situation. "It is not surprising that social media makes a contribution toward the buying behaviour of its users," the team says. However, in online mothers groups and communities this is stronger than ever, the team found. Repeated interactions within the community and the accumulation of trust make the effect stronger still as the community matures. The effect is strongest among mothers with the same number of children and offspring of similar ages.

In terms of the implications for advertiser and marketers hoping to increase sales of their "useful" products, fostering word of mouth is essential, the team says. "Recommendations from other mothers are more powerful than any structured promotion and mothers are utilizing social media to establish and strengthen relationships," they add. Such organic promotion might arise by offering free product trials to the most well connected or influential mothers in a given online community.

Marketing to net Mums

Written by Australian Business

There are questions yet to be answered, which will likely be addressed in subsequent research by this team and others. For instance, is the effect of having children of the same age to do with the mothers identifying with each other or having the same frame of reference, why are more experienced mothers of older children not sought out more keenly for advice? Disposable income and parenting style presumably influence purchase too as might the desires of the children themselves. These issues will be investigated too. Other issues of growing importance such as working outside the home while raising children, working at home and homeschooling might also be considered in future work.

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