

Introduction

*Why did the hipster burn his mouth on his coffee?
Because he drank it before it was cool.*

The word “hipster” will most likely conjure up an image of a bearded guy, sipping a flat white – made of beans from artisan coffee roasters, served out of a Durablex tumbler – whilst working on his portable device from a café or co-working space in a gentrified neighbourhood, such as Shoreditch in east London, Williamsburg in Brooklyn, New York City or Le Marais in Paris. You will find him advertising anything from Samsung’s Galaxy Note Edge (2014, Christmas Beards) to Ikea’s catalogue (2017, Titik Balik si Hipster). To be on trend, judges and contestants on TV reality shows will all have sported this look, just like the fictitious producer, who was running around with the ear piece, backstage at the Arab Idol TV talent show in Egypt (dir Abu-Assad, 2016). The “ironic bearded hipster” is even the butt of a joke in the third instalment of the Bridget Jones blockbuster films (dir Maguire, 2016). Perhaps you’ve seen the “McCafé, flat what?” advertising campaign (2018) to launch McDonald’s introduction of the flat white? It mocks hipsters by portraying them as pretentious and snobbish and their flat white as overcomplicated and overpriced.

So prominent is this hipster image that it has become a byword for fashion victimhood. As is always the case, before the look became à la mode, this fashion started among trend setters. Those in the business of trend-spotting would remember that the moustache wearing gents, who initiated what came to be known as the “vintage” craze in the early to mid 2010s, were the first to grow a beard. Once the moustache

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started to gain traction, the beard became a sign of distinction from the norm. As more men, in turn, followed the beard mania, which was accompanied with a selection of de rigueur haircuts, the trend setters moved on but they left a lasting legacy in guise of barber shops (see for example, Hagerty, 2017). To clone the hipster look, more and more of those started to pop up in trendy neighbourhoods. In parallel, niche premium cosmetic brands started to cater to the demand for this rising trend in male grooming. When the trend reached critical mass (second half of the 2010s), mainstream brands like L'Oréal began to sell beard grooming ranges (L'Oréal Men Expert, Barber Club, 2017 launch in conjunction with a “Movember” Foundation campaign). This range was their latest in men grooming innovation.

For businesses, be they established or start-ups, innovations are a key profitability driver. To this end, “what’s the next big thing?” is the perennial quest. This question has fascinated generations of marketers and scholars alike but also anyone interested in new ideas. In terms of explaining the uptake of various new products or trends into the market, Everett Rogers’ innovations diffusion model (1962) is still the most influential. And, this piece is no exception. Not only is it directly influenced by Rogers’ model but, also, its title will only make sense to the reader familiar with Rogers’ concept. The 2.5% (group of individuals) represents the first category of adopters in stages of adopter-types on the innovations diffusion. They are the Innovators. Worry not, if unfamiliar, we shall begin by revising this groundbreaking study and a couple of its most influential applications in order to highlight a gap in our understanding of the innovations diffusion.

What will be of particular interest is the notion that the success of any innovation depends on spreading the relevant word of mouth. In this process, Early Adopters, the type that immediately follows the Innovator, are the most valuable marketing asset because they are the gateway to the mainstream market. While Rogers references, in this context, the role of opinion leaders in spreading messages about innovations, equally popular among marketers is Malcolm Gladwell’s best selling *Tipping Point* (2000) that most convincingly accounts for how a social epidemic is created. We’ll revise this work, too, but in a gist, Gladwell takes forward the role of the opinion leader by developing three types. Each exerts a different level of influence on their social circles, thus further spreading new ideas from Early Adopters outwards.

But, who is influencing these influencers? The answer to the perennial question about the next big thing may well be lurking somewhere between the Innovator and Early Adopter. And that's what I want to dissect.

Enter the cool factor. Marshall McLuhan (1964) is often quoted to have said that "when a thing is current, it creates currency". Marketers were quick to understand this. Already in the 1960s, the decade of counterculture, they began to package rebellion as cool and sell their own version of the countercultural tale. Ever since, marketers have been investing into cool hunting in order to try to cash in on this elusive factor. Ever since, capturing the cool factor was premised on two widely held (yet false) beliefs, which, like any myth, remained unquestioned.

The-first-to-know will start by demystifying those myths. The first myth is based on ignoring the all important difference between Innovators and Early Adopters. They are two distinct categories, who do not speak the same language. When spreading the relevant word of mouth, it's important to speak the right language to the right type. However, as they are often confused for one and the same, messages often get lost in translation, resulting in brands suffering from image problems and loss of customers. Worse, when lumped together, they can be used synonymously with youth culture, which is, in turn, used implicitly as an indicator of future behaviour. From an innovations diffusion perspective, this is simply wrong and we'll see why as we embark upon our journey.

Innovators are a fluid, global web of non-conformists, who are notoriously difficult to reach, but that small minority creates great hype. The novelty of the-first-to-know innovation diffusion model is that it is focused on the Innovator and the space at the cusp of the formation of the Early Adopter. It postulates that the Innovator is not a homogenous category. To break down the Innovator into distinct types of inventors rather than adopters of innovations, as it were, allows for the separation of innovation and its diffusion. As such, the-first-to-know is a two-in-one model. It's a model for cool's cyclical reinvention as well as a conceptual framework for a deeper understanding of the front end innovation process.

In terms of the power of peer-to-peer communication in the process of getting the innovation into market, we'll be looking at the contribution of the different categories of Innovators in the evolution

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of the marketing communications industry. Specifically, the model looks at cool marketing as a set of innovative tactics and the role of new communication technologies used to connote the cutting-edge, at first, which gradually turn into industry standards. This cycle is in perpetual movement.

If the Early Adopter is the most valued category of adopter on the innovations diffusion because of the power of their word of mouth, the-first-to-know model will enable the marketer to be a step ahead by focusing on who's influencing these influencers. We'll call them Alphas, of which there will be four types. Each is a distinct type of hidden influencer, whose role is to create, authenticate and dictate what new ideas the Early Adopter will be buying into. By targeting the relevant Alpha types at the appropriate stage of the innovation diffusion, marketers will be equipped with relevant insights to plan short term strategies, such as design and opportune brand activation tactics, and, medium term, such as brand development and communication strategies and/or new product development (NPD).

However, there always comes a point when marketing can do no more and risk-averse companies have little choice but to rethink their revenue streams. Here, hype alone cannot help. We need to bring in another type of Innovator. We'll call them Mavericks. Mavericks are visionaries whose ideas are based on disruptive business models. These ideas are founded in new possibilities, which can render existing ways of doing things (consuming a product, being entertained, making a phone call or whatever) dated in comparison or even redundant. As such, Mavericks can help inform decisions, which either involve incremental innovation that necessitates more disruption within established structures or transformational change. Here, the-first-to-know model is based on sniffing out early on the relevant new ideas with big impact potential. And, most importantly, it is designed to alleviate the risk associated with innovation by tapping into the universe of those for whom the future has already happened.

The-first-to-know innovation diffusion model is premised on the idea that out of the union of Alphas and Mavericks, the Early Adopter is born. This paradigm shift in consumption occurs in stages over a decade's cycle, starting in the 7th year of any decade, which we'll call a cool cycle of reinvention. It's been developed over two decades (1987–2007) and tested again (2007–2017). The period (1987–2007) was covered in my book *The First to Know* (2010), where the ideas

of cyclical change over time were first outlined. Neither futurology (but borrowing elements, such as looking at the past to anticipate the future) nor cool hunting (although insider connections among Alphas are worth gold in cool hunting currency), it is best described as cultural insight. By combining lived experience based on insider knowledge of cutting-edge cultures, academic rigour and marketing agility, this framework provides a robust starting point to inspire future-proof ideas.

One of the crucial differences between the-first-to-know model and any other futurology is that we're not looking for future trends. Rather, the model is interested in tracing ideological shifts among Innovators, which in turn, are underpinned by a shared set of values between Alphas and Mavericks. The key to successfully identifying the core values is to tap into the Innovators' networks without confusing them with other types of adopters and by understanding their own hierarchies of distinctions. (And that's what the-first-to-know model will explain.)

When a value shift occurs, a change happens in marketing communication. At first, these are cool marketing tactics, powered by new communications technologies. A significant structural change in communication happens about once or twice in a cool cycle. The rest of the time, it is about using lots of fads to refresh the same tactics. Over time, the mainstream industry also starts using the new ways of communicating, which become the norm. At the same time, a paradigm shift in consumption happens. Cool marketing fads will go in and out of fashion faster than the change in consumption behaviour. In fact, even the-first-to-know outmoded its own vocabulary. Originally, the model was looking at how "hipsters" and "mavericks" shaped the zeitgeist. This was before the hipster phenomenon became widespread. To differentiate the Innovator type from this ubiquitous stereotype, I used the word Alpha instead.

Glenn Adamson, who was Head of Research at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, was kind enough to endorse my research when I was developing *The First to Know* book. He described me as someone who "specialises in showing up at the birthplaces of cool". So, the-first-to-know model is an attempt to illustrate how this essentially haphazard pursuit happens. What I have come to realise over the years is that the haphazard is not so haphazard after all but that it is dependent on the degree of connections between Innovators. And