

# Innovators, Connectors, Salesmen, Mavens and WOMA: Fitting the Tipping Point Groups into the WOMA Schema

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## Introduction

One of the more difficult issues facing researchers is identifying what characteristics make some people special and other people not when it comes to word of mouth advertising. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point* (Gladwell, 2002) identifies four types of individuals who are key to the word of mouth process: Innovators, Connectors, Salesmen and Mavens. This paper discusses how these theoretical groups are identified using a set of 27 key questions, examines in detail the demographic, psychographic and media profiles of each group and investigates in part how these groups may fit into the WOMA schema (WOMMA, 2004).

## A Very Short Theoretical Primer

The major theme of Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point* is that there are four distinct groups of people who by word of mouth can exponentially accelerate the spread of an idea, product or trend so that within a very short timeframe this idea or product has spread to an entire culture like a viral epidemic. The rapid nature of this event can facilitate the overnight success of a new product or the revival of an almost dead brand. The market effects of the tipping point phenomenon cannot be underestimated.

The first question that comes to mind is, "Who are these individuals and what distinguishes them?" Innovators are individuals who are visionaries. As Gladwell says (Gladwell, 2002:198), "they want revolutionary change, something that sets them apart qualitatively from their competitors. They are the people who buy brand-new technology, before it's been perfected or proved or before the price has come down."

Connectors are individuals who know "lots of people" and actually make a concerted effort to "collect" relationships with people (Gladwell, 2002:38-43). The people and relationships that connectors collect

often span multiple spheres of a culture - the arts, sciences, politics, etc. Connectors are often at the hub of a spoke and wheel communication structure.

While Connectors are people collectors, Mavens are information gatherers. Mavens gather information insatiably and are willing, almost eager to share their information with others in an altruistic manner. However it should be kept in mind that Mavens distribute their knowledge in a manner that is factual rather than persuasive (Gladwell, 2002: 60-71).

The persuasive element of the tipping point quartet is the Salesmen. Salesmen are expressive carriers of ideas, products and trends. They not only dispense information but do it in a convincing and expressive manner. There are a number of verbal and non-verbal cues or mechanisms exhibited by Salesmen that contribute to this effect but the end result is that they are very effective communicators of ideas and trends (Gladwell, 2002: 69-81).

These four groups of individuals make up the Tipping Point set. What is less clear is exactly how these groups work together. Gladwell's book only hints at the mechanism by which Innovators, Mavens, Salesmen and Connectors interact to facilitate the viral spread of ideas and trends. While it is clear from the book that the initial idea starts with Innovators, it is less clear whether Mavens pick up the information next and pass it on to Salesmen and Connectors or whether perhaps Mavens and Salesmen simultaneously acquire the information where upon it is spread rapidly through the communication efficiencies of Connectors.

However, one thing that is apparent is that even though the actual size of these four groups within a culture is small (Gladwell, 2004, personal communication) the fact that Connectors communicate frequently with large numbers of people helps fuel the accelerated pace of ideas and trends that are spread by Tipping Point processes. Hopefully the profiles of each of the four Tipping Point groups discussed in this paper will help provide a better understanding of the nature of interaction between these groups and of the process itself.

## Identifying Tipping Point Individuals

One difficult challenge in researching Tipping Point theory and its relation to the WOMA schema is the fundamental problem of identifying individuals whose attitudes and behaviors suggest they belong to one of the four Tipping Point groups. These individuals certainly do not carry signs around their neck that proclaim "I'm an Innovator!"

One way to meet this challenge is to utilize the anecdotal data in Gladwell's book to develop a battery of questions that are theoretically likely to help identify individuals who possess high levels of the traits and behaviors that are exhibited by Tipping Point people. An analysis of the anecdotal evidence in the book resulted in the creation of 27 questions that are used to measure different personal characteristics of each of the four Tipping Point groups. Innovators, for example, might strongly agree with the statement that "I like to put things together in new ways." Connectors would resonate strongly with the statement "I have acquaintances from all walks of life". Mavens would likely agree with the declaration that "I like to learn about things, even if they don't seem relevant at the time." Finally, Salesmen would strongly agree with the statement "People say I am expressive when I share my opinion with others."

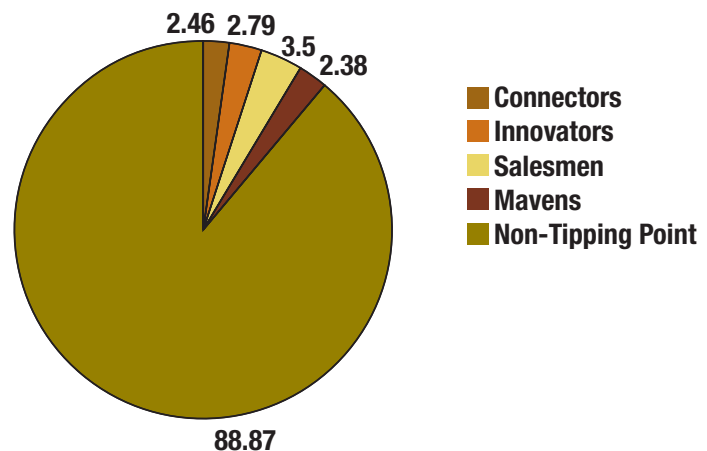
The battery of 27 Tipping Point identification questions was first administered and analyzed using responses from a group of over 8,000 recontact respondents from a prior wave of Simmons' National Consumer Study. Factor analyzing the responses to these questions using a principal components extraction and varimax rotation ultimately resulted in a four factor solution that allowed respondents to be factor scored on characteristics of the four Tipping Point groups. These factor scores were converted into probabilities using

a normal density function and respondents scoring in the top 5% of the probability distribution for a Tipping Point group were labeled as members of that group. The result was that approximately 12% of the weighted recontact data sample was identified as belonging to a Tipping Point group .

## Data Sample

The data used in the current analysis for this paper comes from Simmons' Fall 2004 two-year National Consumer Study (Simmons, 2005). This study consists of 38,991 adults that make up a nationally representative probability sample of the 210,763,000 adults aged 18 years or older not living in group quarters the continental United States. The same procedure as outlined previously in this paper was used to identify respondents in this larger, weighted data sample who likely belonged to one of the four Tipping Point groups.

**Figure 1: U.S. Distribution of Tipping Point Groups**

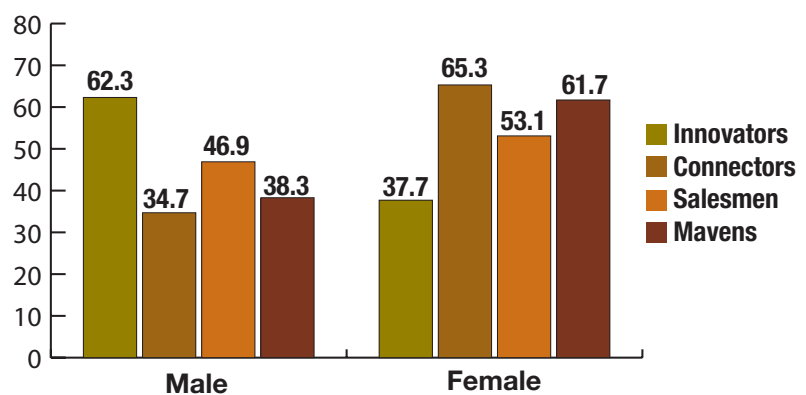


## Tipping Point Demographics

Figure 1 reveals that approximately 11.1 percent of the U.S. population (subject to the sampling frame limitations) were classified as Tipping Point group members. That is, 2.46% were classified as Connectors, 2.79% as Innovators, 3.5% as Salesmen and 2.38% as Mavens leaving approximately 88.9% of the U.S. population as not being included as a member of any Tipping Point group. This total incidence rate, although somewhat arbitrarily bounded, reflects the idea that the Tipping Point subpopulation is relatively small in relation to the general population. Given this assumption, this means that it takes a relatively large data sample in order to analyze the Tipping Point subpopulation to any extensive degree.

Gender distributions for the four groups can be found in Figure 2. Notice that males outnumber females for only one group - the Innovators where they make up 62.3% of the group's membership. Connectors are the group whose composition is most female at 65.3% women. Mavens are the next most female group with 61.7% being women. Finally and somewhat a surprise, Salesmen are split almost evenly, with a slight skew towards women.

**Figure 2: Gender Distribution Across Groups**



There are significant differences in the distribution of age among the four groups. As might be expected, Innovators

skew younger with over 40% of them aged 34 or younger. Salesmen are the next youngest group, with their modal value appearing in the 35-44 year old range. Connectors skew a bit older with the largest group in the 65+ age range. This makes sense since as one gets older one accumulates more and more acquaintances, friends and contacts. Finally the Mavens make up the oldest group of the four, as illustrated in Figure 3..

Interestingly enough, as can be seen in Figure 4, Salesmen make up the largest contingent of college graduates. Innovators - a more likely college-bound group - end up placing second in terms of college experience. Connectors tend to follow Innovators and Mavens appear to have the least educational attainment.

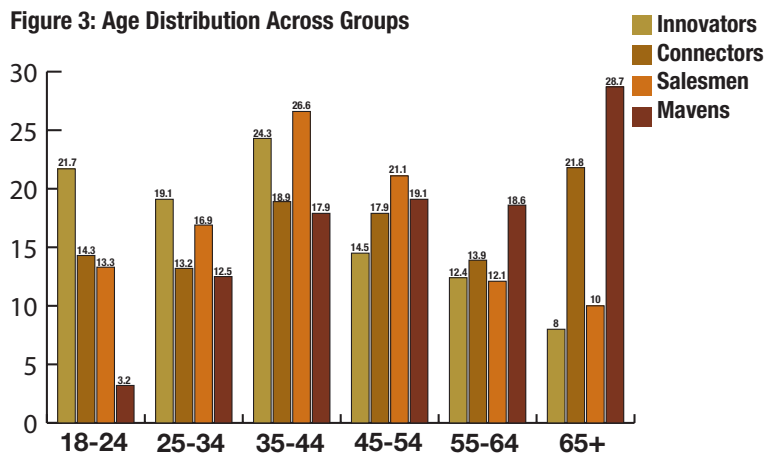
As one might expect, household income reasonably mirrors educational attainment. Salesmen have the highest household income, followed by Innovators. Connectors and Mavens bring up the rear of the income strata as shown in Figure 5.

Finally, one of the lessons learned on the Tipping Point project was that Tipping Point individuals are high engaged people but are hard to pin down demographically. While as we have seen there are some significant demographic differences between the four groups their small size means they are essentially lost in the sea of individuals with similar demographics and so attempting to identify or discriminate them on the basis of demographics alone is futile.

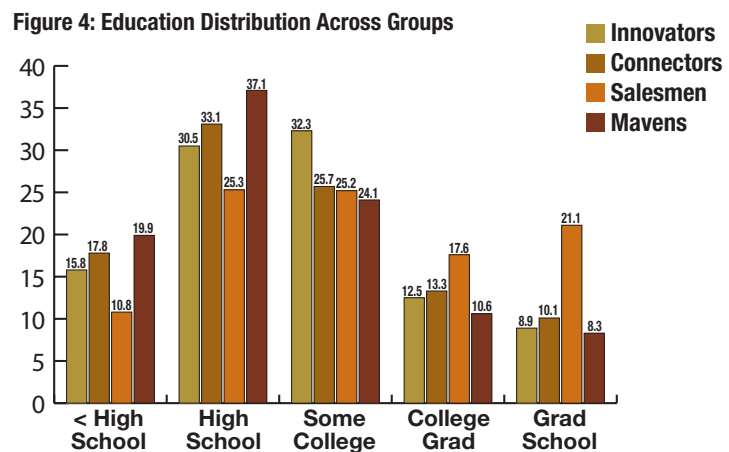
## Media Involvement

Involvement with the media can be an important part of the word of mouth advertising cycle but not in the traditional sense. For example, one can think of media in an alternative perspective where it is responsible for presenting people with information and experiences that they can then combine in new and unique ways to form innovative ideas, trends and products. This is where media would serve as a catalyst for Innovators.

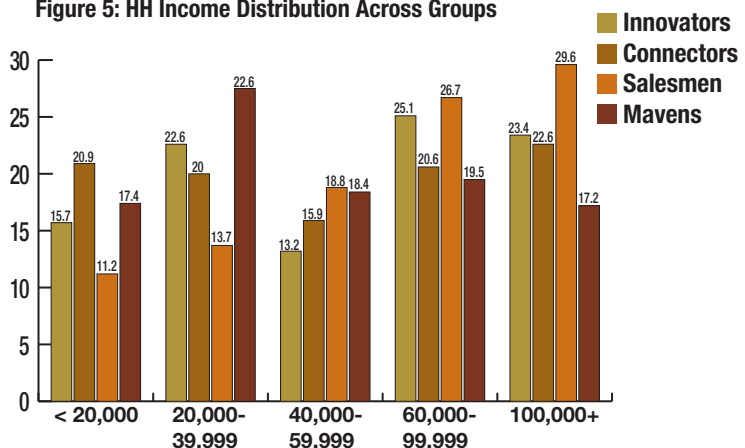
**Figure 3: Age Distribution Across Groups**



**Figure 4: Education Distribution Across Groups**



**Figure 5: HH Income Distribution Across Groups**



Mavens might use different media as a method of gathering information that can later be redistributed to other types of Tipping Point and non-Tipping Point individuals. Connectors may use media as reference points from which to collect and connect to new people in different spheres of the culture. Salesmen may use traditional media sources as reference points in making persuasive arguments to others.

The media involvement scales utilized here are principal components based scales that take into account a number of dimensions of media involvement such as being the main source of one's entertainment or information as well as reflecting the level of trust placed in that particular media. It can be seen in Figure 6 the four Tipping Point groups index over average for almost all media.

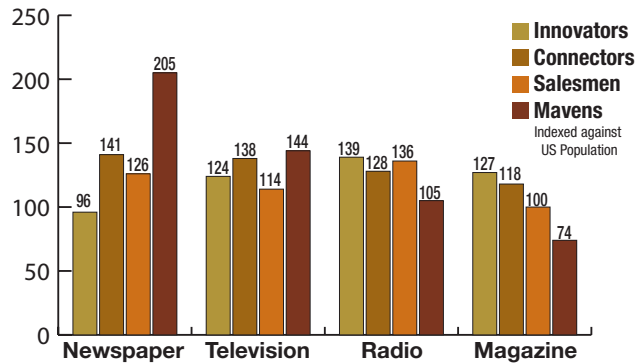
Mavens have a particularly strong affinity for newspapers. The one significant exception is that Mavens under-index for magazine involvement. This is not only an important exception to the pattern in Figure 5 but also contradicts Gladwell's conjecture that Mavens read a larger number of magazines than one might normally expect.

An examination of one additional media characteristic might be useful here. Because Tipping Point individuals are consuming media and so are very likely to be exposed to advertising, it would be useful to understand how likely it is that they might be influenced not just by media programming content in general but by the advertising that accompanies it. Figure 7 reveals that all four Tipping Point groups have above average indices for ad receptivity. The ad receptivity scale is a principal components composed scale that takes into account a number of indicators of attitude towards advertising in general, such as finding advertising interesting or being curious about advertising messages. As one might expect from the Maven's information gathering mission, they index the highest on the advertising receptivity scale.

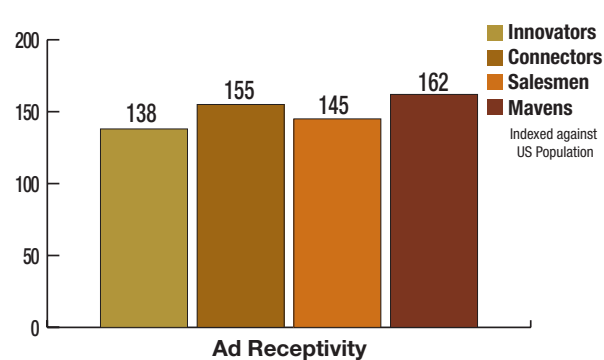
## Shopping Styles

Figure 8 profiles the four Tipping Point groups in terms of four different, non-mutually exclusive shopping styles. The typical Informed Shopper is knowledgeable about products, read product labels and shops for bargains. Note that the Mavens index the highest on this shopping style

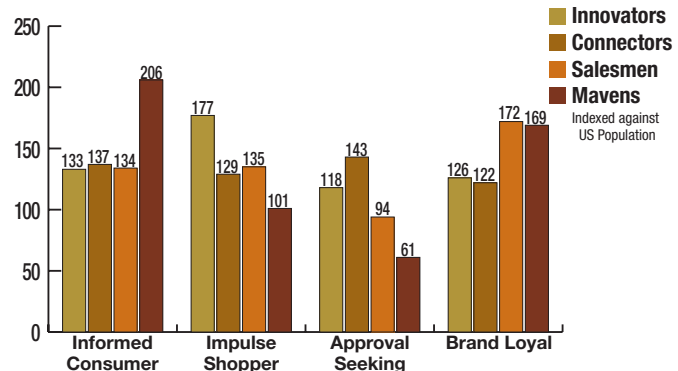
**Figure 6: Media Involvement Across Groups Index for Far Above Average**



**Figure 7: Advertising Receptivity Across Groups Index for Far Above Average**



**Figure 8: Shopping Style Across Groups Index for Far Above Average**



as one might expect from a group whose major motivation is gathering information. Impulse Shoppers - those who purchase items on the spur of the moment - are a characteristic most like the Innovators who are likely to snap up new products even before they are quite market ready. Also notice the affinity for brand loyalty displayed by the Salesmen and Mavens - once these individuals align with a new product or trend they are likely to continue to advertise them by word of mouth even in the face of competing products.

## Personality Types

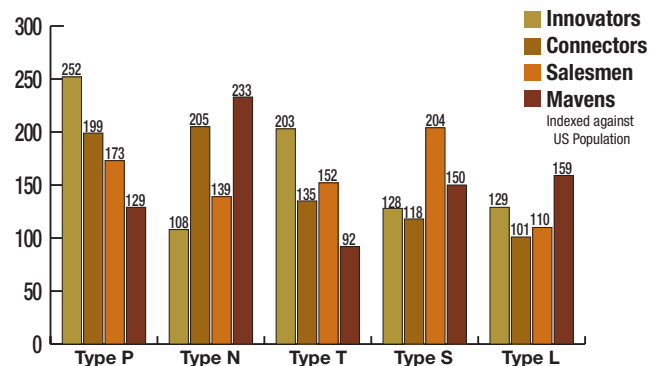
Often it is useful to characterize individuals in terms of personality types in order to better understand their motivations and behaviors. Figure 9 profiles the four Tipping Point groups in terms of five non-mutually exclusive personality types. As can be seen from the figure, the Tipping Point groups differ significantly in terms of how they index to these personality types. For example, Innovators index at 253 to the national average for the Type P personality that characterizes them as being brave, courageous, daring and adventuresome among other traits. Salesmen on the other hand index high for the Type S personality profile which is characterized by people who are outspoken, candid, self-assured, confident and secure. Connectors and Mavens index high for the Type M personality which emphasizes the traits of being sociable, friendly, cheerful, likable and trustworthy.

## Technology

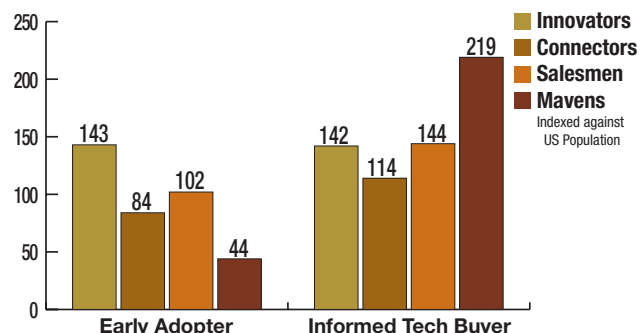
Technology often plays a significant role in word of mouth advertising and so Figure 10 profiles the Tipping Point groups against both an Early Adopter of Technology scale as well as an Informed Technology Buyer scale. As one would expect, Innovators over index for the early adoption of technology (index=143). However, surprisingly, Mavens very significantly under-index scoring a below average index of 44 for early adoption of technology. It would seem plausible to assume that individuals whose main motivation is the gathering of information would readily embrace new technologies such as the Internet and devices such as PDAs.

One correlate that we do know is consistent with this unexpected result is that Mavens are by far the oldest of the four Tipping Point groups and so less likely to embrace new technology. However, this still does not explain the magnitude of the low index for this group. An examination of a related scale - Informed Technology Buyer - shows that Mavens do

**Figure 9: Personality Style Across Groups Index for Far Above Average**

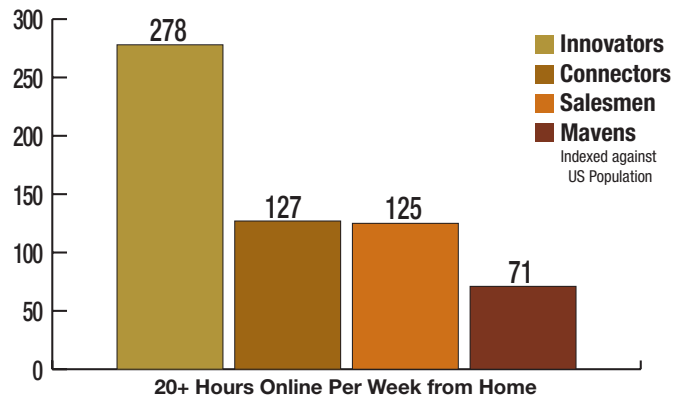


**Figure 10: Technology Across Groups Index for Far Above Average**



indeed carefully gather information about new technology - but the data suggests that while collecting information on new technology they don't always use it themselves. Another related measure is the top level of time spent on the Internet from Home as shown in Figure 11. This data provides further evidence that Mavens are less likely to take advantage of new technology than the other three Tipping Point groups. It is currently not clear to this researcher the reason for this unexpected result and further analysis and examination is necessary in this case.

**Figure 11: Hours Online from Home Across Groups Indexed for 20+ hours per Week**



### Tipping Points and the WOMA Schema

One of the challenges is to be able to tie components of the WOMA schema to the theory of Tipping Points utilizing data already at hand. One of the properties that is associated with individuals in the WOMA schema is the property of influence - that is, the ability to persuade someone to adopt a particular attitude or opinion through interpersonal interaction processes that typically involve words and behaviors.

There are two types of influence indicators that can be found in the data sample utilized in this paper. The first involves the spreading of influence which occurs when someone asks another individual known to them their opinion about some particular product or area of expertise. In the case of the National Consumer Survey, there are several instances where questions take the form of “Friends ask me advice about...” that under this definition can be construed as acts of influence transmission or spread. The second instance involves instances where questions take the form of “ I ask my friends advice before...” which can be construed as acts of influence acceptance from another. Both influence transmission and influence acceptance are mechanisms that play important roles in word of mouth advertising and are present in the WOMA scheme.

Given these assumptions, we can examine the profile and rank the four Tipping Point groups in terms of influence spread and influence acceptance. Starting with influence spread or transmission the obvious candidate for the top ranked position is the Salesmen group, given they are proactive about expressing their opinions and their word of mouth communications with others are likely to contain a high proportion of persuasive content. The second ranked group for influence transmission is the Innovator group. By virtue of creating new, innovative and novel ideas, products and fashions they must influence otherwise tradition-bound individuals to adopt these new and innovative elements, sometimes at the expense of already existing and entrenched alternatives. In order for an individual to be successful at convincing others, Innovators must rely upon word of mouth influence attempts and thus the prediction of this group as second ranked. Predicted to be third ranked are the Connectors because their job is to persuade people to connect and interact and their influence attempts will be indirect and focused on establishing links between individuals. Finally, predicted to be last ranked are the Mavens because rather than transmit influence they are likely to be influenced themselves as they ask others for their opinion and information. Thus the prediction for influence

transmission or spread looks like this:

**Influence Spread Hypothesis: Salesmen > Innovators > Connectors > Mavens**

The converse should be true for influence acceptance by the four groups of Tipping Point individuals, that is:

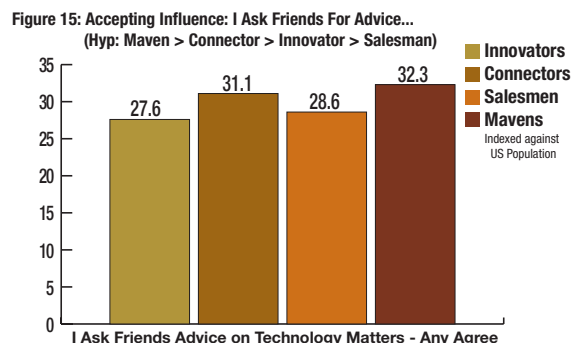
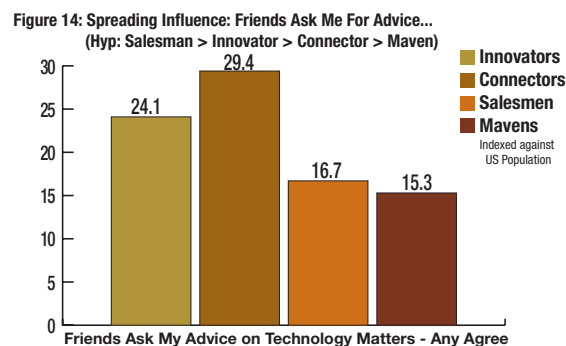
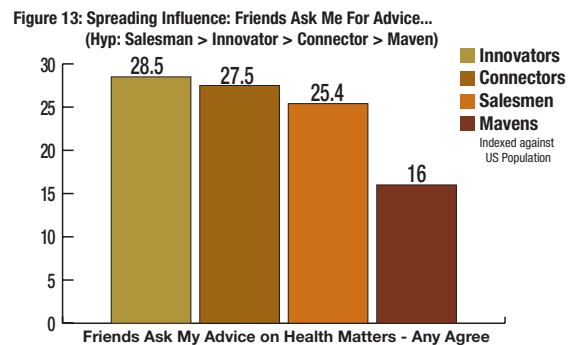
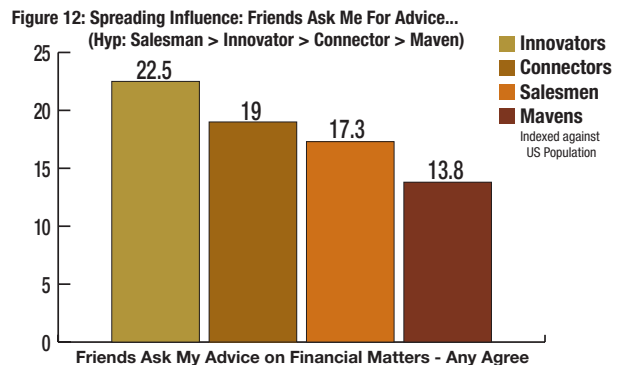
**Influence Acceptance Hypothesis: Mavens > Connectors > Innovators > Salesmen**

Let's now examine several data points where we can test our hypotheses. Figure 12 illustrates the order for influence spread for an Any Agree response to asking friends about financial matters.

Notice that from at least a descriptive standpoint the hypothesis is supported. Salesmen have higher influence spread than Innovators and Innovators higher than Connectors and Connectors higher than Mavens. Now this is a descriptive observation only and further confirmation should be done using an inferential statistical test of the hypothesis. Another confirmatory instance is shown in Figure 13 where the level of being asked about health matters is measured. Again the order predicted is obtained, although it should be cautioned, especially with some of the small group differences that this conclusion might not prevail under inferential statistical testing.

Figure 14 illustrates an instance where the ordering is only partially upheld. The problem here is that the order of Salesmen and Innovators has been reversed. One might logically excuse this result because of the innate relationship between new technology and the concept of innovation and thus the stronger association with Innovators rather than Salesmen. Whatever the rationale, the result is that the predicted order is not obtained here.

The results in Figure 15 suffers from a similar fate for the acceptance of influence. Once again it is likely that the close association between new technology and innovation may have reversed the order for Innovators and Salesmen but nevertheless the prediction is again not upheld.





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## Summary

In summary, this paper has briefly presented the theoretical concepts of the Tipping Point paradigm and explained the development of a method by which one might be able to identify Tipping Point group membership. Using a large national probability sample we have empirically identified and classified Tipping Point respondents and profiled each of the four extracted groups. Finally, we have attempted to at least on the surface link the concepts of Tipping Point to the property of influence as outlined in the WOMA schema. Further research with new data may lead to additional analyses and a better understanding of how the Tipping Point concepts may fit into the word of mouth advertising schema developed by WOMMA.

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## About the Author

Max Kilger is a Stanford University-trained social psychologist directing Simmons Market Research Bureau's efforts in developing new methodologies from both quantitative as well as qualitative fields. His graduate studies revolved around how status characteristics as well as verbal/non-verbal cues shape face-to-face discussion and influence. He is one of the leading investigators in market research in the US in the field of database integration and is responsible for the development of all of Simmons' psychographic scales. His research interests include devising effective measurements for sensitive topical areas, the association between psychographic data and consumption patterns, the relationship of people to digital technology and methods of linking datasets containing disparate individuals