From Knowing Alexa, to Following @Alexa, to ‘Hey, Alexa’:
It’s been three decades since Linda Price and Lawrence Feick’s market maven paper changed the way marketers thought about customer-to-customer influence. In that time, consumer demand and new technology has amplified the need for an ever-available influencer.

BY HAL CONICK
On Linda Price’s kitchen countertop sits an Echo Show, an Amazon Alexa-connected speaker device with a screen. The artificial intelligence-driven Alexa voice answers Price’s questions and makes suggestions for what it thinks she should hear, watch and buy.

About 32 years ago, Price, a professor of marketing at the University of Oregon’s Lindquist College, and co-author Lawrence Feick published the influential paper, “The Market Maven: A Diffuser of Marketplace Information,” in the Journal of Marketing. The paper—which has been cited more than 1,700 times and was featured in author Malcolm Gladwell’s multimillion selling book *The Tipping Point*—coined and defined the term market maven.

Price and Feick defined market mavens as people who have early awareness and high levels of information about the market, namely new products and brands. Market mavens use a diverse number of sources to get their information, are altruistic and simply enjoy shopping—they take pride in being wellsprings of information. Other consumers also recognize mavens when they talk to them, Price and Feick wrote, adding that mavens regularly influence people’s purchase decisions.

At the time, Price says that the concept of a market maven was a vast departure from how economists and marketers viewed consumer-to-consumer influence. Most believed that consumers were driven to maximize their utility in the market by focusing only on their interests. But the market maven is broadly interested in the market and willing to share what they find with anyone who will listen.

Neither Price nor Feick have studied the market maven much in recent years, but Price has noticed changes in the world of consumer influence—one big change sits on her kitchen countertop. The market maven isn’t simply a friend or co-worker anymore, she says, but an Instagram influencer, an aggregate website like Yelp or even a large business such as Amazon, Google or Apple, which she says seem to have co-opted—and at times automated—the role of the market maven. It’s uncharted territory that shifts the field, she says, but this new-age consumer influence is studied insufficiently in academia and still poorly understood by most companies. But there are opportunities to improve: Whereas marketers had a hard time locating market mavens in the 1980s and 1990s, they can now use tools to find online influencers and communities. “When I was enchanted by the information of a market maven, I couldn’t go online and see 2,500 reviews of the local car dealership,” Price says. “Alexa is in my kitchen trying to influence what I know about the world. That’s a really interesting example of the co-opting and automation of that consumer influencer role.”
People are still market mavens offline; most everybody can recognize a maven in their life, Price says, even the young students in her university classes. But in the past, the role played by the Echo Show in Price's kitchen would have been occupied solely by a visiting neighbor or a friend like Mark Alpert, whom Price says was her original source of insight into mavens. Price introduced Alpert—a professor at the University of Texas—to Gladwell while she was being interviewed for *The Tipping Point*. In the book, Price called Alpert "the perfect maven"; she told Gladwell a story about when she was looking for an Easter ham and Alpert, a Jewish man, was still able to give her the best deli to visit and the price she should pay. In interviews with Gladwell, Alpert said that he believed a market maven was someone who wanted to solve other people's problems by solving their own; Gladwell summed up Alpert by saying that "There's something automatic, reflexive, about his level of involvement in the marketplace."

"Alpert is almost pathologically helpful," Gladwell wrote. "He can't help himself."

Pathologically helpful is a good way to describe the content radiating from the smart devices in homes, offices and pockets across the world. Most of us know a maven, someone who takes an almost-obsessive interest in the market, but all of us have access to thousands—perhaps millions—of new-age mavens through searching Google, asking Alexa a question or seeing what the latest trends are on Instagram. When Price and Feick wrote their first paper on market mavens, there was no thought of this kind of digital influence expanse; they saw consumers who drove word-of-mouth communication through interactions, like Alpert helping his friends find the best place to eat or find the best deal on a washing machine, but not consumers becoming de facto publishers and creative directors as we now see through Instagram influencers such as Kayla Itsines (who will recommend food and fitness products) and Mariano Di Vaio (who will tell you what to wear and how to style your hair). Brands of the time were sure they were in control of influencing consumers through ad campaigns, dubious of word-of-mouth and consumer-to-consumer influence.

"I came from a world where the people didn't pay attention to word-of-mouth because they didn't think it mattered. I thought better all along," Price says. "And now everybody wants to study word-of-mouth because they know it matters."

---

From Price and Feick’s "The Market Maven: A Diffusion of Marketplace Information":

"**THE DEFINITION OF THE MARKET MAVEN** includes both general marketplace knowledge or expertise and influence. Thus, the definition is comparable with the definition of the opinion leader in that influence derives from knowledge and expertise, but differs in that the expertise is not product specific. The market maven’s influence is based on more general market expertise. The definition of the market maven does not require that these individuals be early purchasers of products or necessarily even users of products about which they have information."
MARKETERS MUST BECOME NETNOGRAPHERS

Executives at Beiersdorf, a German personal care company, were initially unsure if they would be able to find consumers online who were passionate about deodorant. They wanted to find consumers who could give them information to improve the launch of a new deodorant for their Nivea brand and started searching for customer intel online. “Lo and behold people are discussing everything,” says Robert Kozinets, who has been studying online consumers and communication for more than two decades.

In 1998, he co-authored a paper, “On Netnography: Initial Reflections on Consumer Research Investigations of Cyberculture,” in Advances in Consumer Research—the paper has been cited more than 3,700 times. Kozinets and his co-authors were the first to create and define netnography, a method of online ethnographic research of consumers and communities. Through netnography, companies such as Beiersdorf have found that there are experts in everything—even deodorant and sweat stains.

Beiersdorf hired Munich-based innovation company HYVE, which used netnography to find health, laundry and even weightlifting groups that were discussing the link between deodorant and sweat stains. Deodorants themselves don’t cause sweat stains (they’re caused by sweat mixing with skin bacteria), but HYVE researchers used netnography to find people online who were attributing their yellow-stained shirts to shoddy deodorants. After HYVE surveyed and read web postings by experts of varying niches—including The Undershirt Guy, “the world’s undershirt and underwear expert”—Beiersdorf’s chemical engineers were able to formulate a product that would protect clothing from sweat stains. Eventually, the company launched Nivea Black & White Invisible Deodorant, a product that promised to eliminate sweat stains from clothing. The product won a “Best in Category” award from the GfK Group and, in a press release, Beiersdorf celebrated its launch as “the most successful deodorant launch ever seen in the almost 130-year history of the company.”

“Even though it was off-brand, even though it was very controversial within the company, they ended up basically creating a sub-brand that opened up new opportunities. It all came from listening to people online,” says Kozinets, who is currently a professor of journalism and chair in strategic public relations and business communication at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. “What marketers are dealing with now is really many layers of substrata of expertise. … You’ve got all sorts of different product categories and different elements of product categories that intersect with one another in really unexpected ways.”

If Price were to renew her interest in studying market mavens, she says that she’d start with influencers. Influencers are often people like The Undershirt Guy, niche specialists who grow an authentic audience and spread the word on the

From Kozinets and Rebeca Perren’s “Lateral Exchange Markets: How Social Platforms Operate in a Networked Economy,” a paper explaining the “technologically intermediated exchange between actors occupying equivalent network positions”:

“ALTHOUGH THE SO-CALLED SHARING ECONOMY has grown rapidly and been the beneficiary of significant public attention over the past few years, its relative newness means that we still know very little about how it actually operates. Marketing managers working in these disruptive new fields must make important decisions about their businesses without the tried-and-true guidelines bestowed to managers in established industries.”

ALTHOUGH THE SO-CALLED SHARING ECONOMY has grown rapidly and been the beneficiary of significant public attention over the past few years, its relative newness means that we still know very little about how it actually operates. Marketing managers working in these disruptive new fields must make important decisions about their businesses without the tried-and-true guidelines bestowed to managers in established industries.”
Price wouldn’t be alone in her research; Kozinets studies influencer networks and hosts influencers in his Influencer Relations class at USC. Marketers have also been increasing their testing of and reliance on influencers: MediaKix predicts that by 2020, marketers will spend as much as $10 billion on influencer marketing.

Influencers are driven by both sides of the market, Price says, as they use and publicize products they care about, but they also know their niche market better than anyone else. Researchers and marketers now also have an advantage because of tools such as netnography, textual analysis and social network analysis, Price says. With these tools, marketers can find who is spreading information online, how they’re spreading it and who else is listening, whether through a focused group of people who follow a specific influencer or a less focused review aggregation website, such as Yelp or Google.

Modern influencers differ from the market maven in one big way, Kozinets says: Influencers focus their knowledge on their followers rather than the market. The classic market maven may know a lot about brands that sell underwear and undershirts, but The Undershirt Guy has a small following of people who message and interact with him about what kinds of underwear they like and dislike. More than the products, he’s likely to know a great deal about what other people who are passionate about underwear want.

“Expertise has really changed, in particular from the side of being an expert in a product or product category to being an expert in a particular audience, their perspective and their needs,” he says. “In a way, you have proxies for consumer groups. They’re very valuable because they can give you feedback. If you’re trying to find an influencer for your product and you keep getting the answer, ‘No, this is not a brand for me,’ then you probably don’t have a good product. If you’re rejected by influencers, it’s very similar to being rejected by customers.”
All the dimensions of the market, including the market maven, have broken down into deeper niche categories, Kozinets says. He compares parsing the new world of influencers—including the size rankings of macro-, micro- and nano-influencers—to discovering a new jungle and trying to name its different species. Practitioners are ahead of academics in their work to discover these new aspects of how customers communicate online about their products.

Even so, he says that while many newer companies use online research and Big Data research methods, many legacy companies have trouble consistently finding and using information gleaned from influencers and other online niche experts. "You need information that's right now," Kozinets says. "That's all there online." As Kozinets and two coauthors wrote in a 2018 paper—titled "Evolving netnography: how brand auto-netnography, a netnographic sensibility, and more-than-human netnography can transform your research"—the world is changing whether marketers change with it or choose to ignore the discussions customers are having online. "What comes next is anyone's game," they write.

**THE NEW MAVEN IS AN OBJECT**

Although Price says that she'd study influencers if she were to re-focus on the market maven, she can't help but wonder if today's true market maven sits on her kitchen counter. "Do I believe that Alexa is out to help me?" Price asks with a laugh. "No, I do not. But she is reliably always there."

Market mavens aren't always with you, but they are always authentic—Price says that the magic of the fleshy market maven lies in its authenticity. Alexa can't possibly be authentic, she says, as there will always be an algorithm written and guided by a company—its purpose will always be to make money rather than altruistically share knowledge. But these devices and their influence can't be ignored; Gartner predicts that consumer homes across the world will have 12.8 billion intelligent and Internet of Things-ready devices by 2020, up from about 4 billion in 2016. Our strong ties to human market mavens seem to have stagnated, Price says, while our weak ties to AI and smart objects have become expansive.

But are ties to these electronic, AI-driven voices actually weak? Donna Hoffman, a professor of marketing and co-director of The Center for the Connected Consumer at The George Washington University School of Business, believes the ties we form to these AI voices may be stronger than most people realize. In her career, Hoffman has researched these IoT objects and found that the links between the devices and consumers can be strong due to how often people interact with them.

"There is routine, habitual interaction, but it's different kinds of interaction that happens over time," Hoffman says. "As that happens, these relationships can acquire a great deal of strength and capture a number of emotions or behavioral components. They might become increasingly hard to break."

The relationships will become even stronger when these AI-based mavens begin to make purchases for their owners. Instead of the fleshy maven telling you what's new on the market, the object maven will automatically order and ship new detergent or toilet paper to your house when it notices that these items have run low. This is exactly what companies want, Hoffman says; once object mavens have the trust and control of purchasing decisions in the home, they become the ultimate influencer—the market maven who controls the market.

Brands controlling the role of the maven should raise some interesting questions, Hoffman says. "If I

---

From Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*:

"MAVENS HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE and the social skills to start word-of-mouth epidemics. What sets Mavens apart, though, is not so much what they know but how they pass it along. The fact that Mavens want to help, for no other reason than because they like to help, turns out to be an awfully effective way of getting someone’s attention."
say, 'Alexa, I need more toilet paper,' what is she…” in the background, Hoffman’s Alexa chimes in, adding toilet paper to Hoffman’s shopping cart. “Oh god, no Alexa! Remove! Remove the toilet paper. My god.

For example, what did she just add? I didn’t go to the website. I didn’t read reviews. I didn’t choose a brand. I didn’t look at the prices. What did she just do? One of the first things that’s going to happen is there’s going to be a lot of price discrimination and that’s already happening on Amazon.”

Price discrimination is when a customer is charged different prices for the same product, according to Investopedia—at its worst, sellers charge each customer the maximum price. Hoffman says that this will happen because many consumers will decide to abdicate the decision-making process in shopping—whereas the classic market maven, like Alpert, would lead friends to the best product at the best price, consumers who abdicate their role as researcher will allow object mavens to select whatever item at whatever price it chooses. How an object maven arrives at its choice would likely be a mystery. “Maybe it’ll be the brand I used last time,” Hoffman says. “But what if she decides to put in a new brand because that brand paid more for virtual shelf placement? I think that there are a lot of interesting implications.”

Brands have potential to become a trusted adviser—a loved voice—in a relationship the consumer relies on. The relationship between brands and consumers will deepen as consumers rely more on brand-driven smart objects. Hoffman says that the potential for this kind of relationship would give brands many new opportunities to market through the suggestions of an object maven, but would create a world fraught with privacy concerns, discrimination and data security. What happens when consumers come to trust a voice that is essentially a brand’s proxy?

“It's a big concern as we start to wonder if these different service processes driven by AI are causing us to go from a loss of agency to a loss of free will,” Hoffman says. “But as we start to lose agency—like, I can't control what Facebook serves on the timeline, what kind of things that decide I need to see—I can go to a situation where I can't even control what products Alexa would let me buy. We're not there yet, but we're getting there.”

That's a huge shift from the early days of the internet. In a 1996 paper from Hoffman and co-author Tom Novak—titled “Marketing in hypermedia computer-mediated environments: Conceptual foundations” and cited more than 7,200 times—they wrote that marketers must adjust
and create new marketing concepts or risk their own demise due to customers having more control and information than ever. "We have argued that the traditional one-to-many model, with its attendant implications and consequences for marketing theory and practice, is simply not applicable in this new hypermedia environment," they wrote.

But a 2018 paper from Hoffman and Novak, titled “Relationship Journeys in the Internet of Things: A New Framework for Understanding Interactions Between Consumers and Smart Objects,” they ask marketers to consider smart objects less as objects and more as beings with varying levels of agency, autonomy and authority. What will emerge from a relationship between humans and devices, especially as those devices begin to appear more like humans and less like machines? "As the number and capabilities of smart, Internet-connected objects increase, so do the complexities of the dynamic and evolving assemblages that emerge from consumer-object interaction," they write.

**THE MARKETER’S ROAD FORWARD**

How can marketers manage the uncertainty of this new jungle of mavens? In Hoffman’s world of IoT, object mavens, it remains to be seen; she says that no brand is doing it well yet. The big three digital corporations—Amazon, Apple and Google—all serve as proverbial toes dipping into the water, but no company yet has met the full potential of taking the role of a digital maven.

"But this is what we have right now," Hoffman says. "We can observe what kinds of things are happening."

Brands and researchers are actively observing how the big-three companies run their object mavens, Hoffman says. One of the things she’s currently studying with Novak is the role of trust in the relationship between humans and smart objects. What will make people give up authority and give an object more authority to make decisions on their behalf?

"These companies aren’t just thinking, ‘Let’s just get these objects in the home,’ they’re thinking, ‘How can these objects start to make decisions?’” Hoffman says. "As they make these decisions, they [become] influencers."

For fleshy influencers—those who get to know their followers and what they want en masse—Kozinets says that the first step for marketers is to pay attention to what’s