

OPINION LEADER AND NUTRITIONAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF NUTRITIONAL PRODUCT IN THAILAND

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Abstract

The rules and regulations for communicating nutritional product in Thailand involve to scrutinize marketing message and information. Marketers have increasing difficulties in conveying their advertising message. Many studies in this field have focused exclusively on marketing communication with traditional mass media sources, yet the role and influence of expert people so called, "opinion leader", in regard to the provision of information has not been paid attention. To assure marketing information is effectively communicated, the roles and influences of opinion leaders should be considered. This paper reviews the marketing communication of nutritional product in Thailand and discusses the

concept of opinion leaders with the application of the two-step flow theory. The findings present an integrated model for marketing communication of nutritional product in Thailand which involves the role and influence of opinion leader as another source of information to provide effective communication. The model could serve as strategic guidelines for providing effective nutritional marketing communication strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing communication of general consumer products uses several media types to distribute information. For some particular products, such as nutritional products in

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Thailand, the traditional channel for marketing communication may not be as effective as it is supposed to be. The regulatory involvement of the Thai Food and Drug Administration (FDA) office in nutritional marketing communication to scrutinize and approve the information and message has given market practitioners limited flexibility in providing effective marketing communication. As a result, this challenge drives marketers to find an alternative tool to be effective and so opinion leaders have become the preferred channel for communicating media messages.

The concept of opinion leaders was first investigated with a study of 'two step flow' communication by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). The role and influence of opinion leaders has been extensively studied in market research literatures. Communication from opinion leaders and the roles they play can influence others to evaluate products and services (Antonides & Asugman, 1995; Feick & Price, 1987; Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman, 1994). They are potentially important tools for marketing in disseminating product information. Numerous studies since then have sought to advance research in different business settings and have pointed out flaws in the original two-step flow model (Roger, 1983; Feick, Price, and Hegie, 1986; Huddleston, 1987; Weimann, 1982).

While there has been a growing interest in the concept, none of the research has paid attention to the concept of opinion leaders in nutritional marketing communication. Although the theory was criticized, this research finds the concept is useful to help understand research problems, in particular, the marketing communication of nutritional products in Thailand, which has been paid little attention. Moreover, the notion of opinion leaders and their involvement in the marketing

communication of nutritional products, particularly, in Thailand, has not been mentioned in research and the consideration of opinion leaders, as the alternative source of information is inconclusive. In any case, researchers have little understanding that the nature of this business in Thailand and its marketing communication is influenced by the involvement of the Thai FDA, which monitors marketing messages and product information. For marketers to ignore the potential of opinion leaders as effective personal sources of product information is to underestimate an effective marketing communication strategy.

The purpose of this paper is to determine how marketers enhance the marketing communication of nutritional product in Thailand by focusing on the role and influence of opinion leader in the marketing communication. Additionally, the study will further explore how marketers integrate them into nutritional marketing communication with the assessment of the flow of communication by applying the 'two step communication' model (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Finally, this research will develop a practical model of nutritional marketing communication in the Thai market which was confirmed by expert views to depict the roles that opinion leaders usually play in the field of nutritional products, their involvement and the flow of their marketing communication. The researcher will attempt to capture the natural setting in which it is conducted to focus on the perspective of marketers and practitioners in the nutritional product field by examining the views of marketing experts and using qualitative research to answer the following questions:

- 1) To find the extent to which the role and effectiveness of the opinion leader is important to marketing communication in Thailand; and

- 2) To explore whether opinion leaders should be used as a source of information and be integrated with regular channels of communication for nutritional products in Thailand.

The idea pursued here is rather pragmatic in that it is based on an operational level from the marketing expert's point of view. Generalizing the model is not the purpose of this research approach. Instead, it attempts to formulate an integrative model of nutritional marketing communication for practical purposes of the Thai market. This research contributes to marketing communication of nutritional products with a practical model, which presents several types of the two-step flow and multiple-step flow of communication. The findings suggest a reversible flow of communication between opinion leaders and marketers, which allow more openness and feedback in the communication process. This type of flow activates different ties and networking opportunities for opinion leaders, which extend the knowledge of the two-step, flow theory and opinion leaders' role in the context of nutritional marketing communication in Thailand. For marketing practitioners, opinion leaders are worth utilizing in their marketing communication plan, as marketers need to be in tune with market place challenges in terms of providing effective communication. The model could be their guideline for a successful marketing communication strategy.

Marketing communication in nutrition business:

Advertisement

Marketing communication refers to the ways in which messages are sent from a source of information to consumers (Therese, 1987). In the marketing communication of food and beverages, marketers use several methods of

disseminating information and the appearance to consumers via advertising and mass media outlets such as newspapers, television, and magazines (Ewing, Napoli & Plessis, 1999).

For nutritional products, usage is relevant to consumers' health. The criteria for selecting or purchasing nutritional products will focus on the product details and nutritional information rather than taste or appearance, as is normally the case in general food items. The messages conveyed in advertisements are usually considered as rational appeals whereby consumers are informed of the health benefits by using certain products. Marketers know that consumers rely on the mass media to get product information, so they sometimes overclaim and thus mislead consumers in their advertisements. Consequently, the information is misinterpreted. As reported by Johar and Sirgy (1991), the incomplete information and the claim of specific attributes of an advertised product can lead to ad-based beliefs that can be misleading and deceptive. This has led to the establishment of government food regulations to approve of advertising or promotional messages prior to their dissemination and so protect the consumers' health and pocket. The regulator has warned of the possibility of a rising level of misleading claims in a less regulated business environment (Andrew, Burton & Netemeyer, 2000). Misleading and deceptive inferences can occur from omission or ambiguous information that may need to be prevented of a favorable representation. This situation may induce food companies to make spurious claims about nutrients and exaggerate the supposed benefits of a product in order to lure consumers (Silverglade, 1991).

Product Label

Most consumers also use information on nutrition labels the first time they purchase a

product and it then comes a source of information they can draw on in subsequent purchases (Muller, 1991). Since buying nutritional products is more complicated than buying general consumer products, marketers in this field then have used labels as a source of product information.

Several researchers have examined the effect of adding information on the nutrition label to change the purchasing behavior of the consumers (Levy et al. 1985; Muller, 1985; Shine, Reilly & Sullivan, 1997; Winett et al. 1991). Although consumers increasingly look at labels, their understanding of providing information from marketers is a major issue. Wandel (1997) states that most health conscious consumers read the label and they require more complete and detailed information. As a consequence, to meet the requirement of consumers, providing information on the label should be exhaustive of a product's attributes and its benefits, but communicated in a simplified way. However, providing information on a product's benefits on the label has its own limitations. This is due to the FDA requirement that nutrient contents should be presented conspicuously and the benefit of the products should not be overstated unless its ingredients meet the standard requirement (Silverglade, 1991). Researches addressed that product claims create expectations regarding the healthfulness of the nutrition, which may be confirmed or sometimes refuted by the actual nutritional composition (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Keller, Landry, Olson & Velliquette, 1997). While food regulators perceived that the manufacturers intend to confuse consumers through labeling and pressured them with the labeling control, marketers perceived this as constraint to their effective marketing communication (Wright, 1997). This has an impact in that it limits the

marketing communication process. With this concern in mind, it is essential for marketing practitioners to have an understanding on what can and cannot be communicated on the label and still is able to effectively communicate without breaching government regulations and thereby harming consumers.

The Roles and Regulations of the Thai FDA

An increasing trend of health and nutritional concerns among consumers has led them to acquire more information and details about nutritional products. This, in turn, has led to greater involvement and intervention of the food and drug administration in the nutritional field as a policy maker to preserve information accuracy for consumers' benefit.

In the United States, the federal government determined its role and regulation to protect the consumers' health benefit and the government in 1975 (Stewart, 1981). It was suggested that the nutritional information needs to be presented conspicuously and clearly on the label and include all the serving size and nutrients with its percentage of the US Recommended Daily Allowance (U.S. RDA). The claim of the product could not be overstated for its benefit unless its ingredient meets the standard requirement of U.S. RDA.

In Thailand, the Thai Food and Drug Administration (FDA) plays similar role as the Federal Government in the States to stipulate the regulation for nutritional product. Its role and responsibility is to control and protect consumers' right. Their major tasks are to ensure that health products such as food, drugs, cosmetics and medical devices, etc. available to consumers are of standard quality, efficacy and safety (Ministry of Public Health, 2000). The main task of the Thai FDA is to control

and monitor both the pre- and post-marketing phases of the products as required by the Thai Ministry of Public Health. Most of the time, the FDA will not allow an influencing message or overly convincing picture to be used to motivate the consumer to buy. For marketing communication, the post-marketing activities also cover observation programs to watch for unforeseen hazards, abuse and over-claim messages for usage.

In regard to product label, the main elements of the regulation emphasize that the label and packaging of the nutritional product should have clear information about the use of the product but not for promotional claims. The claims of the product could not be overstated unless its ingredients met the standard requirement. The regulation was created in order to warn of the possibility of misleading claims, as a more relaxed regulation for advertising might induce food companies to make exaggerated claims about unimportant nutrients and mislead consumers about a product (Ministry of Public Health, 2000).

With regard to Thai FDA instructions, the mass media and non-verbal marketing communication needs to be investigated and approved by the FDA. The product benefits and its claims are mostly limited to the advertisement, which strictly limits the promotional message and marketing communication strategy for this field.

Opinion leaders and the flow of communication

An opinion leader has been variously referred to as someone who informs through personal recommendation, influence and communication. It is a type of interpersonal communication which influences and interacts with others in product decision making.

Schiffman and Kanuk (2000) suggest that opinion leaders often specialize in the product categories in which they give information and advice. Opinion leaders are perceived to be knowledgeable because, apart from their perceived credibility, they provide information based on their experience, use and knowledge of a product. They are likely to influence consumers in a desired way and provide information to influence consumers' decision to purchase (Rodger, 1983).

The role and influence of opinion leaders was first addressed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), to reply to the classic question: "Who says what to whom and with what effect?" The original aim of their work was to introduce the two step communication model which recognized the roles and influence of opinion leaders and involved them in the loop of communication with mass media to pass information to the consumers (see Figure 1).

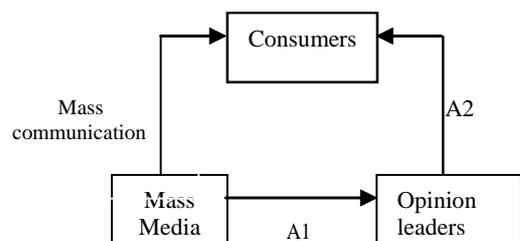


Figure 1. Two step flow communication model (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955)

This model suggests that marketing information from the company reaches consumers via two main channels: firstly, the mass media (such as television, radio and magazines, etc.); and secondly, through opinion leaders. The information from mass media will reach consumers directly. The opinion leaders act as another channel of communication which

receives information from the mass media directly in the first step (A1) and then pass the information which they read or hear, to consumers who look at them as the source of guidance in the second step (A2). The role of opinion leaders in this model is to give information to consumers in order to gain support and justification for purchase decisions.

More recent researches have criticized this model for assuming that the communication flow between opinion leader and mass media may be complementary and the roles of opinion leaders could be both to share and also to seek information (Gatignon and Robertson, 1986; Weimann, 1982). Although many researches have pointed out the flaw in the original model, numerous studies have extended this concept by examining opinion leaders in different settings involving apparel/fashion, pharmaceutical products and technological change (Roger, 1983; Feick, Price, and Hegie, 1986; Huddleston, 1987; Weimann, 1982; Richens, 1983; Roger, Daley & Wu, 1982). These studies have attempted to define the roles of opinion leaders and their importance in the marketing communication process specifically, how they apply this knowledge to improve the flow of information so that it appeals to consumers and the general public.

Kotler (1988) found that in practice marketers and practitioners made substantial use of opinion leaders in the development of marketing communication because opinion leaders added interest to various products. However, as Schiffman and Kanuk (2000) remind us, using opinion leaders in marketing communication plans could create positive and negative influences on an audience. The acceptance of products relies on an acceptance of opinion leaders as the source of information.

Research has indicated positive aspects for their influence (Kiel & Layton, 1981; Price &

Feick, 1984). These studies point out that using opinion leaders as a source of information is sometimes more referred to and mentioned than other media sources because they can directly communicate to consumers. King and Summers (1970) found that using opinion leaders as the source of information across consumer product categories to provide information to consumers had a greater impact than any other source of information in convincing consumers to switch brands such as small food products, hygienic cleaner products and household goods. It seems that this effect can be attributed to the experience and information shared by opinion leaders and the perceived knowledge, which made consumers perceive that value (Jacoby & Hoyer, 1981).

Some research disagreed and debated the so-called benefits provided by opinion leaders (Anotnides & Asugman, 1995; Ellis & Ford, 1980; Thomas, 1994). They found that the dissemination of information from them has not been as important or positive to consumers as previously thought. Selecting inappropriate individuals or groups to be opinion leaders could create a negative situation in that individuals may dislike the degree of influence coming from other people. As noted by Thomas (1984), the influence of other people's opinions may not be important to all consumers, for instance, consumers who have more confidence, initiative and motivation in finding out things, are inclined to try new products and seek positive changes on their own without consulting others.

The influence of opinion leaders (whether positive or negative) will depend on the nature of that product and different classes of consumers. According to Antonides and Asugman (1995), consumers receive information on a product from different sources. The degree of persuasive influence on

consumers depends on the culture, product interest, belief in and access to these sources of information. If the products are to be nutritional products it would be interesting to see how opinion leaders would perform in the marketing communication of them and what their influence would be in the Thai context. Marketers in this field have not adequately identified the advantages and disadvantages of opinion leaders in nutritional marketing communication. The extent to which opinion leaders have a role in and influence nutritional marketing communication is inconclusive. Despite the theory was criticized, the core concept of opinion leaders and their roles in the two step flow communication to transmit the information to others is very appealing and remains useful to illuminate practical thinking in the area of marketing communication of nutritional product in Thailand.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As this research seeks to construct a model, exploring the views and experiences of marketing experts who have used and experienced communication techniques of opinion leaders is aimed. The researcher will attempt to capture the natural setting in which it is conducted to focus on the perspective of marketers and practitioners in the nutritional product field by approaching with qualitative research. The research is essentially concerned with the nature of reality to propose a model; a qualitative approach, which encourages the development of practical and theoretical understanding, is appropriate (Shaw, 1999).

This research selects a qualitative research, which will allow the researcher to build rich descriptions of the context. For research that requires rich data, the qualitative approach would be more appropriate in replacing the deductive method (Yin, 1994). The study will

be an inductive research, which will emphasize finding the in-depth information rather than providing the assumption or hypothesis. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), the inductive process is used to build theoretical concepts and does not test a prior hypothesis. The qualitative study is concerned with understanding behaviour from the interviewees' frame of reference. The findings from this study will be theory building, not hypothesis testing.

The study uses in-depth interviews, particularly with the semi-structured questionnaires. It was designed to conduct two interview sessions to formulate and refine the model for its practicality from 24 subjects. The subjects were selected from marketing managers who have been working in nutrition-based businesses for at least two years. This strategy will give the researcher more flexibility to uncover and explore the issues from participants' experiences and views which emerged during the interview session which is rich in detail to formulate and refine the relevant model. As this research is interested in discussing the justifications of the experts on the potential of the model of nutritional marketing communication, the marketing practitioners were selected as the unit of analysis.

In considering the relevant firms and marketing experts, it was decided that purposive sampling would be an effective way of providing detailed information (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Research suggests that when purposeful sampling is used the number of participants is not determined prior to the researcher's entry in to the field of study. Instead, the number of participants is determined by the extent to which the collection of data will contribute to a better understanding (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Most of the

participants were approached with the same sequence of questions. All the interviews were taped, noted and transcribed and coded for analysis into a meaningful structure to gain an understanding of its meaning and relationship to the research problems.

Sitter, Hertog and Dankbaar (1997) state that qualitative research uses abstract concepts to describe and analyse a series of general phenomena, but based on practical experience. Coding and analysis of the data will identify elements involved in the process, as well as emerging trends or patterns. Relationships among the elements will be explored and interpreted. The use of this method should enable the researcher to link related concepts to generate a substantive grounded theory arising from the data about the opinion leader and marketing communication in the Thai nutrition business. The detailed description of the qualitative research report will provide the best device as a base for the determination of theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Patton, 1990).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Marketing communication – the problem and its enhancement

The most consistent difficulty from the practitioners to provide effective communication in nutritional product is the role and regulation of the Thai FDA which involved in determining and approving their marketing message in each communication tool. It was commented that the FDA concentrated on how marketers provided information on nutrition, and it was not flexible when there have not evidence or proven record for the presentation of all the contained nutrients and product claims. This made the communication unclear and unconvincing to the consumers such as:

R6: If you want to sell the concept of the product's magic nutrient and its benefit, FDA will not allow you to mention the product name with that nutrient in the same advertisement. It has got to be an unbranded statement in that advertisement.

Moreover, marketers faced having no documentary support to backup product claims. A lack of documentary support for a product claim was the other biggest problem in communication. They stated that selling a nutritional product had a different rationale to selling other foodstuffs and that documentation, with a clinical study or laboratory test, would assist consumer confidence in that product. Without documentation and data for verification or proof, the communication of the product and its claims would not be strong enough to convince consumers.

Several ways of marketing communication have been developed to provide consumers with clear information and to capture their needs. In addition to the traditional media avenues which marketers have used, the participants suggested to find spokespersons who had a high credibility and knew the product to help explain the information from their own knowledge and experience. As the television was appropriate to build brand awareness, it sometimes could not provide all the information.

As well as using a spokesperson, the other idea was to provide reference information, such as documentation and a laboratory test to endorse the validity of the product claim and ensure consumers' confidence. Certain product categories such as nutritional products tended to use nutritional claims more frequently. However, the given information from both the spoke person or the documents should not

provide any complicated or too plentiful data in the communication. The information should be clear and easily understood.

Opinion leader – the roles and involvement

Opinion leaders have received attention from marketing practitioners in diffusing information (Linda & Lawrence, 1984). For marketing communication in the nutrition business, the participants were asked to give their ideas on the possible role of opinion leaders. In response, the most mentioned role for opinion leader was to be a spokesperson. Opinion leaders were also used as another method of communication to be integrated into other media. As reported by Gatignon and Robertson (1986), interpersonal communication was perceived to be less biased than other marketing communication methods, such as television and salespeople, and allowed the recipients to be more confident than with previous experiences.

Participants reported that opinion leaders in this field were mostly people who were credible, well educated and reputable, and therefore accepted by the public. Opinion leaders include nutritionists, doctors and

healthcare staffs, and sometimes health-conscious celebrities. As spokespeople, they could be involved in the nutrition business by symbolising another medium for disseminating information. Regarding their roles, one manager stated:

S11: They can help us educate consumers about the nutrition knowledge because what is provided on the television does not explain all the details of the product and its importance. It does not provide as much as we want to tell them and the opinion leader is our second choice that we use to back up.

The benefit of their roles and involvement is, firstly, they could give information to make consumers confident in the products. Secondly, they could impart information to other opinion leaders because they could speak the same language. Finally, they could be the people who shared and informed about the primary concept of the product to marketers and other media sources, and then the given information will be disseminated in the advertisements (see Figure 2). Research has stated that promotional efforts would be significantly improved if they could involve opinion leaders or influential people to

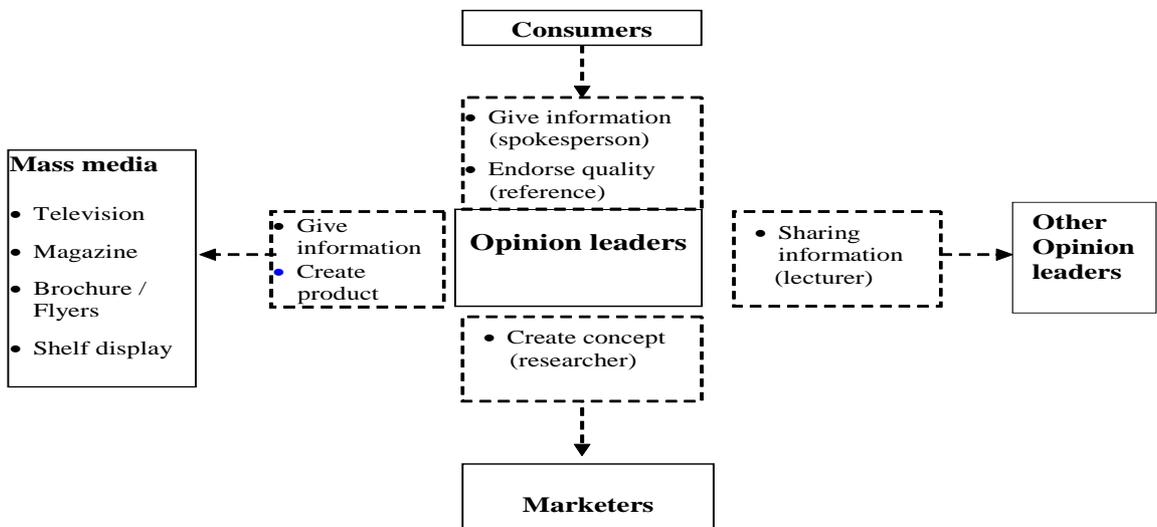


Figure 2 : Role of Opinion leaders for marketing communication of nutritional products in Thailand

add enthusiasm and interest in the products (Huddleston, 1987).

Although the involvement of opinion leaders sounds supportive and beneficial, there were the negative impact and possible drawbacks of using opinion leaders. While their influence could build consumers' confidence, selecting the inappropriate profiles of opinion leaders could gain no acceptance from consumers and lead to product denial. Leonard-Barton (1985) addressed this issue and other research has shown that selecting the wrong profile of opinion leaders could have a negative impact on products (Gatignon & Robertson, 1986).

The opinion leaders are more concerned about their personal ethics which could interfere with their own image and credibility and make them feel uncomfortable about participating in the marketing communication. The risk in using opinion leaders could create more harm for the opinion leaders themselves, as their frequent involvement could tarnish their own image. It was reported that these issues were risk to the companies and opinion as both were aware and very cautious in operating this way.

However, most the managers agreed on the use of opinion leaders for marketing communication of nutritional products in Thailand. The suggestion is that opinion leaders are appropriate for a business that has difficulty and limitation in developing marketing communication or any business that operates within the regulations as set out by the FDA. It was commented that:

P9: The role of the Thai FDA is crucial to our work, and we have to find the appropriate way of communication. We cannot leave our

information on the television or magazine to the consumers with an unclear message which sometimes was censored by the Thai FDA. And many times, the opinion leader would be the alternation.

It was suggested that to use the opinion leaders solely would depend on the type of products and the budget of each category. In general, it would be better to integrate opinion leaders with other media for both awareness and better communication of a nutritional product. Finally, it would be beneficial if marketing experts knew how to use them effectively and to weigh the advantages and disadvantages.

An integrative model of marketing communication for nutritional products in Thailand

The findings from this report enable the development of a model for marketing communication of nutritional products in Thailand. Based on the exploration of this study, it was suggested that opinion leaders should be integrated with other media channels to provide information. The model provides guidelines for marketers so that they can select a marketing effort focusing either on the mass media or opinion leaders for the dissemination of marketing information to consumers. One emphasised mass media communication to gain brand awareness and the other was planned using opinion leaders to promote product endorsement. With this effort allocation, three loops of communication (A, B and C) emerged with different flows of communication. Each flow of communication shows how messages flow from one step to another step with an input of marketing effort which reaches consumers (see Figure 3).

Flow of communication from Marketing Effort 1

For Marketing Effort 1, marketers input their effort through mass media channels and the flow of communication in loop C emerged. It was found that the flow of communication was usually initiated at C0 level by having marketers and opinion leaders connected. In real practice, participants suggested that marketers usually approach opinion leaders to be researchers and try a product in the initial marketing stage. In addition, instead of a one-way approach from marketers, opinion leaders can also give feedback, comments or suggestions. With this relationship, the initial flow of communication C0 was found to work in a two-way direction. Then, the message or information from C0 will be gathered by marketers, pass to various mass media channels

in step flow C1, and then pass to consumers in step flow C2. With this flow of communication, marketing information will reach consumers, a combination of C1 and C2. As two participants insisted:

P5: Having opinion leaders giving us feedback, we normally discuss it with them and sometimes ask them to write the theme or article so that we can capture and summaries information to convince consumers. But normally, we use mass media channels to help distribute information to consumers.

When C0 is determined between marketers and opinion leaders, the direction of flow between them is two-way communication. If this marketing effort is connected with other media, then the information will pass to consumers.

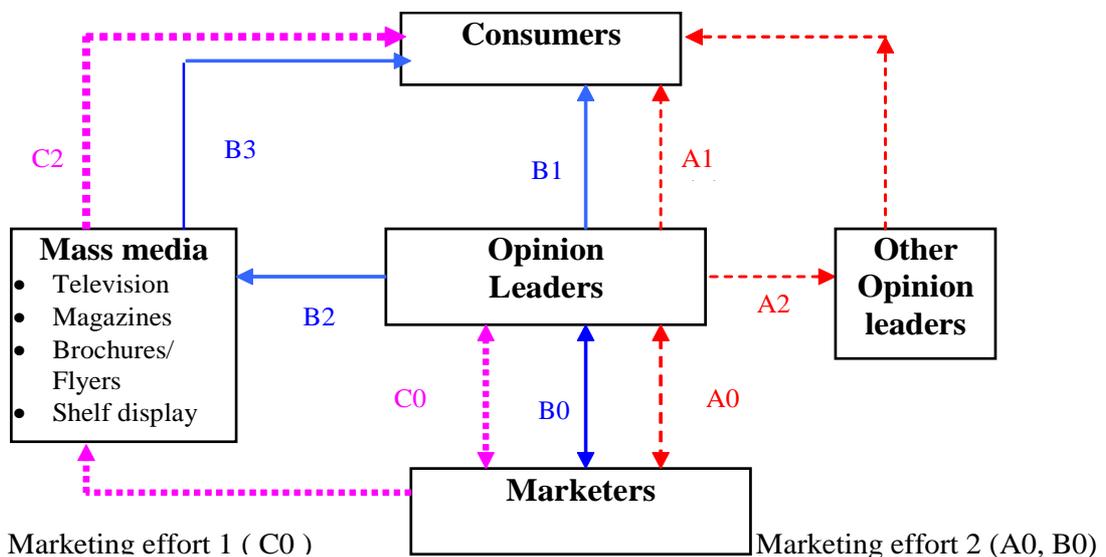


Figure 3: An integrative model for marketing nutritional products in Thailand

Flow of communication from Marketing Effort 2

For Marketing Effort 2, marketers put their efforts into using opinion leaders for product endorsement. With this approach, two loops of communication flow could come out as loop A and loop B. In loop A, opinion leaders were reported having three different target groups: marketers, consumers and other opinion leaders. Most participants remarked that, firstly, communication is initiated between marketers and opinion leaders. A flow occurring along A0 will be a two-way direction where opinion leaders can act in other roles (for example, researcher). The flow between them is reversible during the communication. Secondly, opinion leaders can act in other roles, namely as spokespersons and referees to give information to consumers directly via their communication. Thus the flow pattern of A1 emerges. Finally, opinion leaders can share information with other opinion leaders in step one (A2) and ask them to spread information to consumers in step two (A3).

In loop B, participants described that to complete the total communication package by having opinion leaders involved in the media, the opinion leaders contract three different groups: marketers, consumers and representatives of the mass media. It was found that the communication flow initiated between marketers and opinion leaders (B0), is a two-way communication with a reversible flow with opinion leaders providing new trends and testing products. Next, marketers will use opinion leaders as intermediaries to distribute that information to consumers and the B1 flow of communication emerges. In this role, they become spokespersons and referees who give information to consumers directly. Finally, opinion leaders may be asked to give

information to media people and let the media channels disperse that message to consumers. With this route of communication, flows B2 and B3 emerge. As one manager addressed:

Y9: Flow of B2 is fine as we usually ask opinion leaders to endorse the message and sometimes they were invited to be on air or broadcast for an interview or discuss about health related issues and nutritional information. And yes, television and radio will help disperse the message as your flow in B3.

In regard to the marketing communication model, the role of opinion leaders is distinctive as either a media source or as an intermediary who propagates information for consumers. As a result of the different roles they play, three formations of communication could occur. This suggests a divergent communication flow of 'one step' and 'two step' that reaches consumers. *Weight of marketing effort and the identification of success*

An appropriate weight of marketing effort is crucial to successful and effective marketing communication plans. It was found that the average proportion of investment that marketers put into opinion leaders could range from 5% to 30%, while the rest was for normal media channels. The criteria of their justification for this proportion are based on three factors: stage of product life cycle; budget allowance; and product segment. At the introductory stage, opinion leaders will play a bigger role in introducing a new product, so marketing investment and related efforts could be up as high as 30%. However, in the growth and stability stage where products are well known on the market, the proportion spent opinion leaders could be phased down and average out at 5%.

To monitor the effectiveness of opinion leaders, the only obvious method that most participants insisted on was to conduct a market survey which is called "attitude and usage" study (A&U). The survey will be a communication evaluation which marketers can emphasize as focusing on finding sources of information, recommendations and product trial potential measurements in which marketers can trace percentage responses of opinion leaders as compared to other methods.

Monitoring the effectiveness of communication, sales and market share would be the factors demonstrating success. However, these three factors also have been contributed to from several activities which include the impact of using opinion leaders and other promotional activities. Therefore, tracking consumers in a market survey is essential and it is fundamental to understanding consumers on what influences them and what they access and use. Opinion leaders are worthwhile as another tool providing information though the consequence can only be seen in three to six months afterwards.

Implication and future research direction

This research effort and the proposed model offers an explanation as to (1) what roles the opinion leaders play in nutritional product marketing and how they can influence it, and (2) why opinion leaders should be integrated in the marketing communication process. The study contributes to marketing practice by providing an insight into the problems of marketing communication for nutritional products in the Thai market. It also shows how to create effective communication by combining advertising methods with the opinion leaders into an integrative model. Further, the model gives rise to marketing opportunities in which

firms can take advantage of the attractiveness of the role and influence of opinion leaders. This integrative model would be appropriate for product categories such as nutritional products as these are the categories that marketers have difficulties and challenges in providing great details via the traditional mass media sources from the restriction of Thai FDA's rules and regulations.

Based on the original theory of opinion leaders and the two-step flow of communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), it is apparent in the proposed model that the flows of communication from opinion leaders produced three different types of the flow between opinion leaders and other sources of information to reach consumers. For an academic point of view, this model of nutritional marketing communication contributes by presenting several flows of communication which is different from the original theory. The findings suggest that opinion leaders can be integrated not only with other media sources, but also influence other opinion leaders. In addition, opinion leaders can give feedback to marketers on the effectiveness of information. Regarding this role, the study found a reversible flow of communication between marketers and opinion leaders which allows more openness and feedback on the marketing communication process. Hence, this type of flow activates different ties and networks for opinion leaders which extend the knowledge of two-step flow theory.

For the policy makers, assuring adequate information disclosure and preventing misconceptions will be their main endeavors. Though this research has not obviously shown where the problem could affect consumers from some limitation of information, the study reflects the difficulties consumers could have in trying to understand the information coming from restricted communication sources. Restrictions

on full disclosures could conceivably result in frustration in consumer decision making. In this respect, while policy makers need to assure that communicating information from manufacturers does not exaggerate, an educational campaign should be considered to publicly teach people to be aware of nutritional knowledge in relation to their own health. The consequences could save consumers from being the victims of misleading communication. It might also help them reduce the need to count on such information or being influenced by other people's opinions.

For marketers, the result of this study has shown the way marketing practice and nutrition marketing communication plans have to be more effective in a challenging business environment. By using marketing experts' opinions, this model, hopefully, can inspire marketing managers who are developing marketing communication plans to design nutritional marketing communications and achieve desired outcomes. Rather than following the usual routine mass media marketing communication, marketers should take a more pragmatic approach to the mix of their marketing communication strategy, which involves opinion leaders to sustain an effective marketing communication for clearer and more complete information.

This study is the first stage of research carried out explicitly to obtain preliminary insights into Thai nutritional products and their domestic marketing. The study found that there is difficulty in providing communication and how marketers can enhance the effectiveness by using opinion leaders. What is more important is that the present contribution points to the need of a research agenda to investigate opinion leaders in the context of developing effective marketing communication process. Establishing

general conclusions about the model is not the purpose of this research approach. Instead, it attempts to develop a practical perspective from field observations. The model presented may be used as an outline for developing and testing a set of propositions. The model and integrated role of opinion leaders remains to be further studied. The first direction could be to quantitatively test the model from consumer's points of view, to test their acceptance of opinion leaders as an alternative effective source of information. The second direction could involve testing the model with other different product categories to see whether this model can be generalised with other product categories and whether the role of opinion leaders is relevant to other product types

CONCLUSION

This paper has developed a basic concept of marketing communication for nutritional product in Thailand with the involvement of opinion leaders. This research has purposefully integrated opinion leaders with other media sources as a deliberate strategy for the marketing communication of nutritional products. The proposed model offers explanations to the important role and influence of opinion leader to the nutritional marketing communication in Thailand. It also recommends the extent to which opinion leaders should be involved in marketing communication, depending on the stages of a product's life cycle, size of business and marketing/promotional budget. In the marketing context, the effectiveness of communication from each source and its influence could be an indication for marketers to consider their marketing efforts and resources. In other words, marketers should be able to clarify the different impacts on the brand and consumers. Which source will have a greater impact on consumers' beliefs?

The opinion leader? Or the usual form of media advertisement? While such a combination was used by managers in the data presented, the impact of using opinion leaders as an additional channel of communication needs to be monitored as to whether it is workable.

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