

by Ban Mittal, Ph.D.

Influentials. They are the leading indicators of what Americans will be buying. [They have been]—for more than five decades—from choosing energy-efficient cars in the 1970s to owning computers in the 1980s to adopting IRAs in the 1990s to being the trailblazing users of the Internet and cell phones today. And influentials have led the way in social development as well—from the revival of self-reliance in managing their own healthcare, money, and consumption to mass skepticism about the marketing claims of everything from breakfast food to politicians.

--Ed Keller and Jon Berry, Authors of *The Influentials*.<sup>12</sup>

Who are the Influentials in U.S.? First things first. They are equally divided by sex: half of them are males, and half females. But on other demographics, they differ from the population as a whole. As Table 10.7 shows, in age, they are slightly older, and more of them are married. They are also more educated, more likely to be dual income couples, have a higher median income, and hold an executive or a professional job. With their relative prosperity, they are more likely to own a home and multiple-cars, and they are more likely to be financial planners and savers.

In their psychological makeup, Influentials are much more optimistic about their own future, believing in the prospects of achieving a “good life” if not already achieved (83 vs. 71 percent), and have an internal locus of control, believing in their own ability to influence their life chances (82 vs. 63%). Their leading values are protecting the family, honesty, enduring love, stable personal relationships, knowledge and learning, and work that is fulfilling. Power, wealth, status, and looking good are not that important (although they already possess some of these resources). Indeed, materialism is not their obsession, but neither is austerity. Rather, they like to experience and enjoy good things in life (e.g., a vacation home, travel, fine dining, etc.). It is just that, unlike materialists, these “good life” resources are not the end all and be all of their lives.

## A New Breed of Influentials in the Cyber Age

E-fluentials are a subgroup of Influentials—the persons who are net-savvy and influence other people both offline and online. Thus, their influence is not limited to word-of-mouth; rather they influence people via word-of-mouse as well. That is, they also exercise their influence in cyberspace.

Who are these e-fluentials? To answer this question, a market research company called Burson-Marsteller collaborated with RoperASW, a research company that polls consumer trends. Based on its research findings, it describes e-fluentials thus:

E-fluentials make waves. They project their opinions far beyond the scope of their individual contacts. An e-fluential imparts an experience to 14 individuals on average. The vast majority spreads the word through multiple communication channels. Furthermore, these electronic town criers are as likely to share information on products and services offline as they are to relay their experiences online.

E-fluentials comprise about 10% of the U.S. online population (i.e., about 11.1 million). By definition—since they are opinion leaders, they get asked about twice as often by others for advice on wide ranging topics from healthcare to new technologies. And, also by definition, they express more confidence in sharing their opinions with others. They visit both company Websites and opinion sites (such as Planetfeedback.com) more than do other online consumers, and they double check the information found on these Websites. They are online more often than others and they participate in newsgroups, discussion forums, bulletin boards, and listservs (a type of online channel). Most importantly, they believe, much more than do others; in the power of the Internet as an opinion influence channel. See Table 10.8.

Source: *MYCBBook* (Chapter 10)  
[www.mycbbook.com](http://www.mycbbook.com)