

DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS: GETTING PEOPLE TO DO NEW THINGS

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Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system. When a new music style or hairstyle or type of automobile are becoming popular, that's diffusion at work.

Diffusion consists of four main elements: 1) *the innovation*, an idea, practice or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption; 2) *communication channels*, the means by which messages are exchanged; 3) *time*, or process; 4) *a social system*, the structure and functioning of relations among a set of individuals or other units, such as organizations.

For the most part, diffusion research has been conducted using a common paradigm by 1) rural sociologists, to understand why farmers decide to use new agricultural products, 2) public health specialists, to understand how people at high risk for AIDS or HIV can improve or safeguard their lives, 3) marketing researchers, for understanding customer decisions about new products and services and 4) anthropologists, to understand the impact of one culture on another culture. For communication scientists, any of innovations can be a diffusion study topic.

According to this, all people are categorized as “*innovators*”, “*early adopters*”, or the “*early majority*”, “*late majority*”, or if they were really late in adopting something, “*laggards*”. Most of us are relatively early in adopting certain types of innovations, and at the same time relatively late in adopting other types of innovations.

Besides distinguishing among people depending on when in time they adopt an innovation, an important goal of diffusion researcher has been to understand why we adopt innovations we do. This goal has led diffusion scholars to study how recent adopters perceive the things they adopt. These perceptions of adopters have been categorized as “*attributes*” of innovations. Understanding how people feel about innovation spread more rapidly or slowly when compared to the other innovations.

The attribute with the strongest relationship to adoption is *economic advantage*. Diffusion scholars have shown that innovations with high economic advantage (those that don't cost much) diffuse rapidly. *Compatibility* with existing values and beliefs and previous ways of accomplishing the same goal is a second very important attribute.

Innovations that don't require a great deal of change from past ways of doing things diffuse more rapidly than innovations that have no similarity with previous practices. A third important attribute of innovations is *complexity*. New things that are very complex and difficult to understand take longer to diffuse among people.

A certain concept in diffusion is newness and its relationship to personal *uncertainty*. Innovations present us with new possibilities and raise new questions for us. Uncertainty is reduced by the cognitive processing of information about the innovation. After potential adopters first learn of an innovation and if they perceive that the innovation has some value or attraction for them, they will be inclined to seek out information about it.

Another key concept that drives the diffusion process is *social pressure*. The cumulative result of different people each being subject to social pressure from their peers is termed the diffusion effect, a change in the norms of the social system towards the innovation.

During the *knowledge stage* potential adopters first become aware of an innovation. During the *persuasion stage* people actively seek out information to reduce their uncertainty about whether an innovation is good idea, and thus are open to persuasive appeals. Persuasive appeals made through interpersonal, face-to-face communication are most effective in leading to adoption. During the *decision stage* individuals or other decision making units face a "go-no go" point in time when they adopt or reject an innovation. During the *implementation stage* adopters actually begin to use the innovation. Often, we "reinvent" innovations a bit, to make them most useful for us. During the *confirmation stage* users actively seek out information from other people that confirms that their decision to adopt or reject an innovation was correct.

The social system can either help or hinder innovation diffusion through the applications of personal influence.

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