

## **Role model influence on word-of-mouth, loyalty and switching behaviors of dog owners**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to identify role model influencers on purchase intentions of dog owners and explore the effects of these influencers on consumer behavior in the dog industry. This study looks at the effects of parental, veterinarian and other dog owner role model influences on word of mouth, brand loyalty and switching behaviors of dog owners. The results indicate that there is a significant and positive relationship between each of the different role models and individual dog owner's word of mouth, loyalty and switching behaviors.

Keywords: Word of Mouth, Loyalty, Switching Behaviors, Pet Ownership, Role Models

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## INTRODUCTION

The size of the pet industry continues to grow at a fast pace. The American Pet Products Manufacturer's Association (APPMA) who has compiled pet industry statistics for over a decade, released figures that show that pet spending has more than doubled from \$17 billion in 1994 to an estimated \$50.84 for 2011, growing at a rate of approximately 2 billion dollars a year over the last four years (APPMA 2011). The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the pet industry is now the seventh largest retail segment in the country. In 2010, Americans' spent \$48.35 billion dollars on their pets: \$18.76 billion for food, \$10.97 billion for supplies and O-T-C medications, \$13.01 billion for veterinarian care, \$2.13 billion for live animal purchases, and \$3.51 billion for pet services including grooming and boarding (APPMA, 2011). The pet industry has experienced astonishing growth in terms of dollars being spent on pets and pet related goods and services. There are also a considerable amount of Americans who own dogs, with over 46.3 million households having at least one dog. Canine ownership will be the consumer category that is the focus of this study.

There are several emerging trends that are occurring in the pet industry that must be mentioned. One trend is that companies who have historically been known for human products are now featuring a wide variety of pet products including pet clothing, branded toys, shampoo and gourmet treats and foods. Some of those companies include Harley Davidson, Paul Mitchell, and Omaha Steaks. Another emerging trend is that pets are becoming more welcome in hotels all across the nation. Hotel's are not only allowing dogs but also pampering them with oversized pet pillows, plush doggie robes, massages and gift packages that include treats, toys and other pet themed items. Chains such as La Quinta Inn, Drury Inn and Best Western welcome pets.

Pet foods are becoming much more complete, nutritious and well balanced throughout the life of a pet. Many pet products are now becoming high tech including computerized identification tags, automatic pet feeders, self-cleaning litter boxes and touch-activated toys. Monogramming of sweaters and food and water bowls is another emerging trend in the pet industry as well.

The literature on dogs or animals is quite extensive in the scholarly realm. Researchers have considered animals as philosophical and ethical subjects (Feeney 1994; Francione 1997; Franklin, Tranter, and White 2001; Goodall, and Wise 1997; Herzog 1988; Jamison, Wenk, and Parker 2000; Wise, 1999. Researchers have explored animals as reflexive thinkers ( Bekoff 2003; Bradshaw 2004; Burghardt 1985; Russell 1995; Zentall 1999). Researchers have also considered dogs or animals as domestication and predation (Adair 1995; Dahles 1993; Fox 1981; Rollin 1990). Another category that researches have considered is animals as entertainment and spectacle (Armstrong 2004; Beardsworth and Bryman 2001; Hawley 1993; Lawrence 1986). Researchers have also considered animals in science education and therapy (Agnew 1998; Arluke 1990; Beirne 2002; Felthous, and Kellert 1987; Garner 1995) and animals as symbols and companions. Scholars in marketing have looked at animals as symbols and companions. Some specific areas include animals as the extended self (Belk 1996), attitudes towards animals (Brown 2004; Brown, and Katcher 2001; Fogle 1986; Hickrod and Schmitt 1982; Hirschman 1994; Kidd, and Kidd 1990; Sanders and Hirschman 1996), values and lifestyles of dog owners (Sanders 1990), and the animal's role in print advertising (Erickson 1986; Spears, Mowen and Chakraborty 1996).

Aylesworth et al (1999) concluded that marketers have begun to identify the significance of animal companions to the life's and experiences of consumers. Their research was broken down into a framework around three key stages: the acquisition stage, the consumption stage and the disposition stage. The consumption stage, which refers to the "dog-related activities owners conduct during the lifetime of the animal" (pg. 388), is the stage of importance to this study. The consumption stage was further broken down into three categories of relationship, maintenance and medical.

Who influences the dog owner's decision to make dog food purchases was an area that Aylesworth et. al (1999) suggested for further research and that has not been an area heavily studied to date. This study will attempt to identify role models who influence these purchase decisions in the dog products realm. Once these have been identified, examining the effects of role model influencers on word of mouth, brand loyalty and switching behaviors as it relates to purchase intentions of consumers of dog related products can take place. These are extremely important to all involved in the dog ownership/buying/selling process. Not only does this market consist of pet stores, but it also includes vets, grooming facilities, breeders, and dog-themed sales of novelties such as shirts, calendars and figurines.

To achieve the goals of this study the following issues were examined: 1) Discuss briefly the role models that were identified in a previous study (Clark and Page 2008) such as parents, other dog owners, and veterinarians with respect to their potential influence on dog ownership behaviors. 2) Examined these role model influencers on word of mouth behaviors of existing pet owners as it related to purchase intentions of dog related products and services. 3) Explored the effects of these role model influencers on brand loyalty as it relates to purchase decisions of dog related products. 4) Studied these role model influencers on switching behaviors of consumers who purchase dog related products and how it affected purchasing decisions of the dog owner, and lastly identified managerial implications and future research.

### **Role Model Influencers**

A study by Clark and Page (2008) concluded that parents, veterinarians and other dog owners acted as role models for the respondents. Breeders and TV commercials were reported to have little effect. Role model influence was measured using scales that existed in the consumer socialization literature (e.g. Moschis & Churchill 1978; Rich 1997). The 5-item scale utilized a Likert type range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Each respondent completed this scale for their parents, other dog owners, veterinarians, media (TV) and breeder influence. This method was used to determine if current dog owners saw any of the aforementioned people as role models with regards to their dog ownership and purchase intention behaviors. The means of these scales are as follows: parents (mean = 5.997), other dog owners (mean = 4.217), veterinarians (mean = 5.815), media (mean = 3.820) and breeders (mean = 3.663). Each scale had an acceptable Coefficient Alpha, with parents alpha = .957, other dog owners alpha = .919 and veterinarian role model influence scale having an alpha of .924. The rest of this study focuses on the influence of these role models on word of mouth, switching behaviors and word of mouth on purchasing decisions of the dog owners (Clark and Page 2008).

## Hypotheses

Word of mouth influences many variables in the consumer behavior and marketing realm. Word of mouth is defined as casual, affirmative communication about a product or a retailer with other consumers (Westbrook 1987). Word of mouth can influence teenage purchase decisions (Bush, Bush, Clark and Bush 2005) behavior in general (Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991), switching behavior (Wangenheim 2004), perceived justice and satisfaction (Gelb 1995; Gremler 1994). It also impacts repurchase intentions (Moshe 2003), perceived risk, loyalty, and consumer risk taking (Woodside and Delozier 1976). Word of mouth may actually reduce the impact of cognitive dissonance (Bone 1995). One focus of this study will be to see if role models influence word of mouth behaviors of dog owners.

There is scant research that exists on the influence of role models on word of mouth behaviors. One study examined the impact of athlete role model influence on teenager's favorable word of mouth communications. It found that athlete role model influence is "positively related to teenager's favorable word-of-mouth communications" (Bush, Martin and Bush, 2004, pg. 113). This is of importance to this study we are trying to determine if other dog owners, veterinarians and parents role model influence leads to favorable word of mouth communications as it relates to purchase intentions of dog related products and services. Role models could then influence positive word of mouth behaviors such as satisfaction, repurchase intentions and loyalty. This leads to the following hypotheses:

- H1: Parent role model influence on dog owners is positively related to favorable or positive word of mouth behavior.
- H2: Veterinarian role model influence on dog owners is positively related to favorable or positive word of mouth behavior.
- H3: Other dog owners influence on dog owners is positively related to favorable or positive word of mouth behavior.

Brand loyalty is another area that was explored in this study to see if role models influence brand loyalty in the dog industry. It is important to identify all of the positive marketing advantages brand loyalty has. Aaker (1991) found that reduced marketing costs, more new customers and great trade leverage were advantages associated with brand loyalty. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) discovered two different types of brand loyalty, purchase loyalty and attitudinal loyalty. These lead to greater market share and higher relative price for the brand, which are both positives, associated with brand loyalty. All of these are important in the dog products and services industry.

It is important to look at customer lifetime value (CLV) when discussing loyalty. Collings and Baxter define CLV as a "financial measure that indicates the expected future value of a particular customer relationship over time" (Collings and Baxter, 2005, pg. 24). The more brand loyal a customer the higher the CLV of that customer and the more revenue that it brings to a company. This can be of significance in the dog products and services industry.

Research on the effects of role model influence on brand loyalty appears to be limited. Loyalty to a brand is extremely important in the dog industry as it relates to purchasing dog food and other dog related products. Bush, Martin and Bush (2004) discovered in their research that

role models influence on teenagers enhances brand loyalty in a positive way. The goal of this study is to see if this holds true as it relates to veterinarians, other dog owners and parents influence on brand loyalty when purchasing dog related products and whether a positive relationship exists. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H4: Parent role model influence on dog owners is positively related to brand loyalty.

H5: Veterinarian role model influence on dog owners is positively related to brand loyalty.

H6: Other dog owners influence on dog owners is positively related to brand loyalty.

The existing research on the effects of role model influence on switching behaviors is almost non-existent. First an overall understanding of switching behaviors and the impacts it has needs to be explored. Research has identified two segments of people who switch to other brands. One is the satisfied switcher, who switches to a different brand, for other reasons than dissatisfaction with the current brand. Some reasons to switch brands for the satisfied switcher include price, convenience, word of mouth and discontinuing of a product or service. Another is the dissatisfied switcher who switches brands because of substandard experiences. These could include service failures, responses to service failures satisfaction, price increases, and ethical and quality issues (Ganesh, Arnold and Reynolds 2000; Keaveney 1995; Tahtinen and Halinen 2002; Wangenheim 2004).

Martin and Bush (2002) examined the influences of role models on adolescent consumers and the effects that they had on switching behaviors as it related to purchase intentions and behaviors. Martin and Bush identified three significant findings in their research. They found that adolescent consumers are less likely to listen to role models and switch to a different brand when these role models are urging them to remain loyal to one brand. Martin and Bush also found that when role models are advocating brand switching adolescent consumers are more likely to switch brands. Another important finding that may have an impact on future studies in the dog industry is that it appears that the price of the products is critical as well. Adolescents switching behaviors do not appear to be strongly influenced by role models when price is a central issue. The goal of adolescents is finding cheaper products rather than to pay attention to the advice of role models to remain either switch to or not switch to higher priced brands or stores (Martin and Bush 2002).

From the evidence, there appears to be a positive relationship between role model influences and switching behavior when role models are advocating brand switching. A negative relationship may exist when role models are influencing someone to be loyal to one brand. This study is trying to determine whether parents, other dog owners, veterinarians, and veterinarians influence switching behaviors of people who own dogs. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H7: Parent role model influence on dog owners is positively related to product switching behavior.

H8: Veterinarian role model influence on dog owners is positively related to product switching behavior.

H9: Other dog owners influence on dog owners is positively related to product switching behavior.

## **METHOD**

This study was conducted at a large southeastern university. Surveys were distributed to a group of undergraduate students to administer to dog owners that they knew. Each student was given ten surveys to administer. 231 dog owners' responses were collected from over 90 different zip codes in the United States. Respondents were given a written survey in which they gave their responses to role model scale items as well as behavioral intentions questions such as word of mouth, switching behaviors and brand loyalty. Various demographic variables were included at the end of the survey. The average age of respondents was 24.4. Fifty three percent of the respondents were male. Eighty three percent of the respondents owned a pure breed dog. Other demographic information of the participants can be found in table 1.

## **MEASURES**

Word of mouth, brand loyalty and switching behaviors were measured using an adapted version of the 12-item scale created by Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996). Since we were not focusing on complaint behaviors in this study, these 4 scale items were not included.

Word of mouth was measured using a 3 item, 7 point likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree, to (7) strongly agree. Each respondent recorded their responses on the scale for each of the three role models. The opening statement read: "The opinions of my Veterinarian influence me to:" with parents and other dog owners being replaced in the space for veterinarian. Each of the three scale variations had Coefficient alpha's above the acceptable .70 cut off point, with parents alpha = .930, veterinarian alpha = .918, and other dog owners having an alpha = .924.

Loyalty was measured using a 3 item, 7 point likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree, to (7) strongly agree. Each respondent recorded their responses on the scale for each of the three role models. Each of the three scale variations had Coefficient alpha's above the acceptable .70 cut off point, with parents alpha = .85, veterinarian alpha = .863, and other dog owners having an alpha = .885.

Switching behavior was measured using a 2 item, 7 point likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree, to (7) strongly agree. Each respondent recorded their responses on the scale for each of the three role models. Each of the three scale variations had Coefficient alpha's above the acceptable .70 cut off point, with parents alpha = .762, veterinarian alpha = .81, and other dog owners having an alpha = .785.

## **RESULTS**

Regression analysis was used to test the hypothesized effects of the independent variables (parent, veterinarian, other dog owners role model influence) on the three dependent behavioral variables (word of mouth, loyalty, and switching behavior).

Hypotheses H1, H4 and H7 were tested by using the regression model given in table 2. The results from the regression models show that parents role model influence is significantly and positively related to dog owners word of mouth, loyalty and switching behaviors. Each

regression model was significant and had a t-value for the standardized beta coefficients for each dependent variable greater than 1.96. These results lend support to the idea that the greater the role model influence a parent has (or has had) on a dog owner, the greater the influence this will have on that dog owners behaviors.

Hypotheses H2, H5 and H8 were tested by using the regression model given in table 3. The results from the regression models show that veterinarian role model influence is significantly and positively related to dog owners word of mouth, loyalty and switching behaviors. Each regression model was significant and had a t-value for the standardized beta coefficients for each dependent variable greater than 1.96. These results lend support to the idea that the greater the role model influence a veterinarian has on a dog owner, the greater the influence this will have on that dog owners level of word of mouth, loyalty and switching behaviors.

Hypotheses H3, H6 and H9 were tested by using the regression model given in table 4. The results from the regression models show that other dog owners role model influence is significantly and positively related to dog owners word of mouth, loyalty and switching behaviors. Each regression model was significant and had a t-value for the standardized beta coefficients for each dependent variable greater than 1.96. These results lend support to the idea that the greater the role model influence another dog owner has on an individual dog owner, the greater the influence this will have on that dog owner's degree of word of mouth, loyalty and switching behaviors.

## IMPLICATIONS

### Word of Mouth

Role model influence of other dog owners, veterinarians and parents have a positive effect on word of mouth behaviors as it relates to marketing actions that may be taken, and ultimately purchasing decisions of dog related products by dog owners. How does this impact the different types of companies that exist in the dog industry? Dog shops need to do all they can to ensure that the consumers who shop in their stores are saying positive things about them. Dog shop owners want to ensure that existing dog owners and veterinarians have positive experiences in their store, which in turn will relate to favorable word of mouth about their company. Dog shop owners want to develop a strong customer relationship with existing dog owners and parents. This can lead to a more loyal customer base; strong repurchase intentions and a high level of satisfaction of new and existing shoppers. Loyal customers purchase more goods, are easier to reach and act as enthusiastic advocates for a firm (Harris and Goode 2004). Dog shops also may want to form an alliance with local veterinarians in order to get them to say positive things about their store and the products that they sell. Dog food, toy and medicine manufacturers need to partner with veterinarians to get them to say positive things about their products to dog owners. Advertisers may want to use parents, other dog owners and veterinarians in testimonials that say positive things about dog related products. Publicity and public relation departments may want to do all they can to create positive publicity about their products through the use of loyal dog owners, parents and veterinarians. Most of these promotional activities are currently being done on some scale but the findings in this article give validity to these approaches and therefore these should all continue. Even more emphasis needs to be placed on these activities. Gremler (1994) adds even more credence to this when he found

that many customers indicated word-of-mouth as the major source, some even cited it as the best source, when making a purchase decision.

A unique approach that is currently not being done by dog food and toy manufacturers is to target advertising and promotional materials to the role model Influencers and then let them through word of mouth tell other dog owners about the products. Press kits, samples and other promotional materials mailed directly to veterinarians and other dog owners could then lead to positive word of mouth about the dog products that they receive.

### **Brand Loyalty**

Role model influences of other dog owners, veterinarians and parents have a positive effect on brand loyalty as it relates to marketing actions that may be taken and ultimately purchasing decisions of dog related products by dog owners. How does this impact the different companies that exist in the dog industry? Dog stores want to do all they can to get other dog owners, parents and veterinarians to remain loyal to their dog related products. This can be done through the development of a strong customer relationship management program to help build loyalty to certain dog stores, food, toys or medicines. Advertisers need to focus on dog owners and veterinarians when creating ads that sell dog related products since there are strong role model influences from this group. The focus on influencing the role models that dog owners have will be of great importance to companies in this industry. Focusing marketing efforts in this area could create a more loyal customer and increase the lifetime value of that customer as well as increase market share for the company.

### **Switching Behaviors**

Role model influences of other dog owners, veterinarians and parents have a positive effect on word of mouth behaviors. How does this impact the different companies that exist in the dog industry? Dog shop owners who are trying to get consumers to switch to their store could create a referral program that provides savings to other dog owners and veterinarians who refer new customers to their store since these groups have a strong impact on the switching behaviors of dog owners. Advertisers may want to feature parents, other dog owners and veterinarians in comparison ads in order to attempt use the role model influence that exists from these groups. It may also be worthwhile to send press kits, samples and other promotional materials mailed directly to veterinarians and other dog owners which could help lead to dog owners switching to these new products because of the influence of veterinarians and other dog owners.

### **CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This paper contributes to the literature by (1) adding new role models to the consumer socialization literature base, (2) examining these role models effects on consumer behavior: loyalty, word of mouth, and switching behaviors, and (3) exploring a rapidly growing segment of retailing that has been mostly ignored in the scholarly realm.

Further research on role model influence and WOM and the effects that it has in the pet industry may want to focus on identifying what specific influences they have. It may be of benefit to storeowners who sell higher priced pet merchandise to understand what impact these



role models have on WOM as it relates to cognitive dissonance and lessening perceived risk. It may be of importance too to see the relationship between role model influence on positive WOM and loyalty in the dog industry and see if there is a strong correlation between the two.

As far as switching behaviors go, it may be of importance to future researchers to see if they can emulate the results that Martin and Bush (2000) found when analyzing the impact of role model influences on adolescent consumers. Do dog owners respond similarly when making decisions as to what dog related products they are going to buy? Are they less likely to listen to role models and switch to a different brand when these role models are urging them to remain loyal to one brand? When role models are advocating brand switching are dog owners more likely to switch brands? What impact if any do prices have on switching behaviors as it relates to the purchase of dog related products? It would also be of importance to see the correlation between those who are breed loyal and those who are not and the impact role model influences have on each of these groups as it relates to WOM, switching behaviors and brand loyalty. Are dog owners who are breed loyal also more brand loyal?

A potential influencer of dog related products may be the dog itself. Examining the role of the dog when a customer actually brings them to the dog store and shops with them could be of great interest. Does the pet influence impulse buying? Is the shopping trip shorter or longer when the dog is present? What influences does the dog have on total purchases? What motivates these shoppers? Are they utilitarian or hedonic? These are some interesting questions that could be explored in further research.

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**Table I. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample:**

| <b>Demographic Characteristics</b> |                              | <i>Range</i>      |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Average Age of Respondents</b>  | 24.40                        | 18-57             |
| <b>Gender</b>                      | <i>Number Of Respondents</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
| Male                               | 124                          | 53.7              |
| Female                             | 106                          | 45.9              |
| <b>Race of Respondents</b>         | <i>Number Of Respondents</i> |                   |
| Caucasian                          | 214                          |                   |
| African-American                   | 12                           |                   |
| Asian                              | 2                            |                   |
| Hispanic                           | 1                            |                   |
| Other                              | 1                            |                   |

|  |  |                   |
|--|--|-------------------|
| <b>Geographic area of Respondents</b>                          | <i>Over 96 different zip codes represented</i> |                   |
| <b>Average # of dogs currently owned by Respondents</b>        | 1.75   |                   |
| <b>Average age when you got your first dog</b>                 | 7.73   |                   |
| <b>Average number of dogs owned in the past</b>                | 5.77   |                   |
| <b>Is your dog a purebred?</b>                                 | <i>Number Of Respondents</i>                   | <i>Percentage</i> |
| Yes  | 190  | 82.3              |
| No   | 38   | 16.5              |
| <b>Have you bought dog themed merchandise in the past year</b> | <i>Number Of Respondents</i>                   | <i>Percentage</i> |
| Yes  | 129  | 55.8              |
| No   | 101  | 43.7              |

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**Table 2****Regression Results of Parental Role Model Influence on Behavioral Intentions**

| <b><u>Independent Variable:</u></b> Parents                | <i>Standardized Beta Coefficient</i> | <i>Adjusted r<sup>2</sup></i> | <i>t-value</i> | <i>Significance Level</i> |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| <b><u>Dependent variable</u></b><br>Positive Word of Mouth | .331                                 | .106                          | 5.302          | .000                      |
| Loyalty  | .196                                 | .034                          | 2.991          | .003                      |
| Switching Behavior   | .304                                 | .089                          | 4.812          | .000                      |

**Table 3****Regression Results of Veterinarian Role Model Influence on Behavioral Intentions**

| <b><u>Independent Variable:</u></b> Vets                   | <i>Standardized Beta Coefficient</i> | <i>Adjusted r<sup>2</sup></i> | <i>t-value</i> | <i>Significance Level</i> |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| <b><u>Dependent variable</u></b><br>Positive Word of Mouth | .421                                 | .173                          | 7.000          | .000                      |
| Loyalty  | .305                                 | .089                          | 4.828          | .000                      |
| Switching Behavior   | .319                                 | .098                          | 5.006          | .000                      |

**Table 4****Regression Results of Other Dog Owner Role Model Influence on Behavioral Intentions**

| <b><u>Independent Variable:</u></b> Other dog owners       | <i>Standardized Beta Coefficient</i> | <i>Adjusted r<sup>2</sup></i> | <i>t-value</i> | <i>Significance Level</i> |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| <b><u>Dependent variable</u></b><br>Positive Word of Mouth | .320                                 | .098                          | 5.095          | .000                      |
| Loyalty  | .263                                 | .065                          | 4.122          | .000                      |
| Switching Behavior   | .296                                 | .084                          | 4.653          | .000                      |