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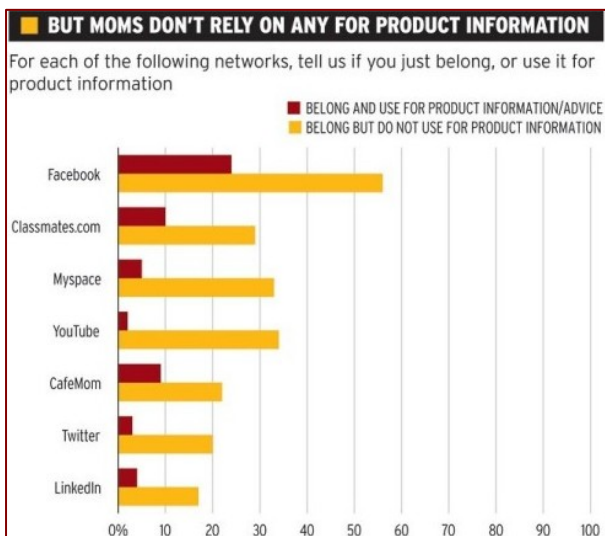
For Moms, Offline Friends Still Wield Heavy Brand Influence

Study: Social Media Is Kept, Well, Social, While Marketers' Website Become Important Tool for Product Info

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Technology's influence is widely assumed to have morphed the over-the-fence backyard chat into mommy blogs and Twitter networks. But when moms are seeking product advice, it's not all social-media all the time.



A study due out next week from the Parenting Group found that while moms are avid web and social-media users, they still turn to family and friends first, whether by phone, e-mail or in-person, when making decisions about product purchases. And marketers targeting moms would be wise not to give up on that backyard fence just yet: Moms are four times more likely to go to their personal offline network than online social networks for product recommendations and buying advice.

Open to conversations

The survey, conducted via Parenting's MomConnection online research panel, found 23% of moms use Twitter, but only 3% are using it for product information. A whopping 81% of moms use Facebook, but again only 24% use it for product information.

"Regardless of which social network they use, only a small minority said they use those social networks for product information," said Nancy Hallberg, chief strategy officer of the Parenting Group. "[But] the interesting thing is that moms are

very open to having conversations online with marketers, they just want to have them on their own terms."

The study found that more than 80% of moms visit a brand's website for information and 65% have signed up for newsletters from brands. That is, they are usually seeking information from brands directly, rather than looking for a social interaction with brands on a third-party social site.

First and foremost, social

"It's not that you've got to be in their social conversations. Social networks are first and foremost social," Ms. Hallberg said. "If they're on a social network, looking at pictures, being entertained or looking at friends' videos, they're saying [to us] 'I'm not in the mood to have a conversation about a product. But when I am in the mood, I'll go directly to that marketer.'"

The Parenting Group study jibes with other market researchers' findings. BabyCenter's recent 21st Century Mom Report found that 10% or fewer of Facebook, MySpace and Twitter moms use those sites for product recommendations, while the majority (from 60% to 90%, depending on the site) use them for socializing and entertainment.

A September online Prospectiv study found that only 1% of moms surveyed thought blogs were the most effective way to promote a brand, while almost half (47%) cited product samples offered online, and another 40% said coupons were better ways to plug a product.

Online vs. offline

Researchers agreed it's not an online vs. offline battle, but rather more about the effectiveness of personal connections in either place.

"The power of word of mouth is more defined by the affinity for and trust of the information source rather than online versus offline means of interaction," Laura Fortner, senior VP, marketing and insights at CafeMom, said in an e-mail interview. "You can have an offline recommendation made by a stranger in a grocery aisle that may not be as powerful or impactful as online recommendations made by someone in your social network with whom you share common interests, values and experiences."

Brad Fay, chief operating officer and co-founder of word of mouth research firm Keller Fay Group, agreed that it's not an either/or proposition.

"We've found that more than 90% of word of mouth about brands among moms and others happens offline. But a lot of the time, they're talking about something they've learned online. ... In the last several years social media has become important. But we have to be careful when we start employing new tools (as marketers) that we don't use them in isolation. Don't stop doing what works in other places."

Indeed, it may be that the power is in the mix of both.

"Facebook is a very popular destination for moms and they give their opinion on everything, including products. Twitter is a gold mine for exchanging product information targeted to moms. Moms are incredibly active in tweeting and retweeting about product giveaways, contests and coupons. Twitter parties -- a hybrid of online and offline -- are also increasingly popular [and] provide helpful information while also highlighting products and brands," Stephanie Azzarone, president of Child's Play Communications, wrote in an e-mail.

But, she added: "Moms want the feedback of other moms, whether online or in the real world. They haven't stopped listening to real-world friends just because they are also having online conversations. What's interesting is that those online friends are also becoming friends in real life."