

# Diffusion Theory

## Stages in decision process

The innovation-decision process is the "mental process through which an individual or other decision-making unit passes from first knowledge of an innovation, to forming an attitude toward the innovation, to a decision to adopt or reject the new idea and the confirmation of this decision" (Rogers, 1995, p. 118).

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## Diffusion Theory Spreads Ideas

Diffusion theory seeks to explain "the process by which an innovation or idea is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (Everett Rogers' book *Diffusion of Innovations*, 1969, p. 5).

The communication channel refers to "the means by which messages get from one individual to another" (Rogers, 1995, p. 17).

Over 50-years worth of studies support the belief that mass media channels are "more effective in creating knowledge of innovations, whereas interpersonal channels (word of mouth for example) are more effective in forming or changing attitudes toward a new idea, and thus influencing the decision to adopt or reject it" (Rogers, 1995, p. 195).

Most individuals evaluate an innovation not on the basis of scientific research by experts "but through the subjective evaluations of near-peers who have previously adopted the innovation. These near-peers serve as social models, whose innovation be-

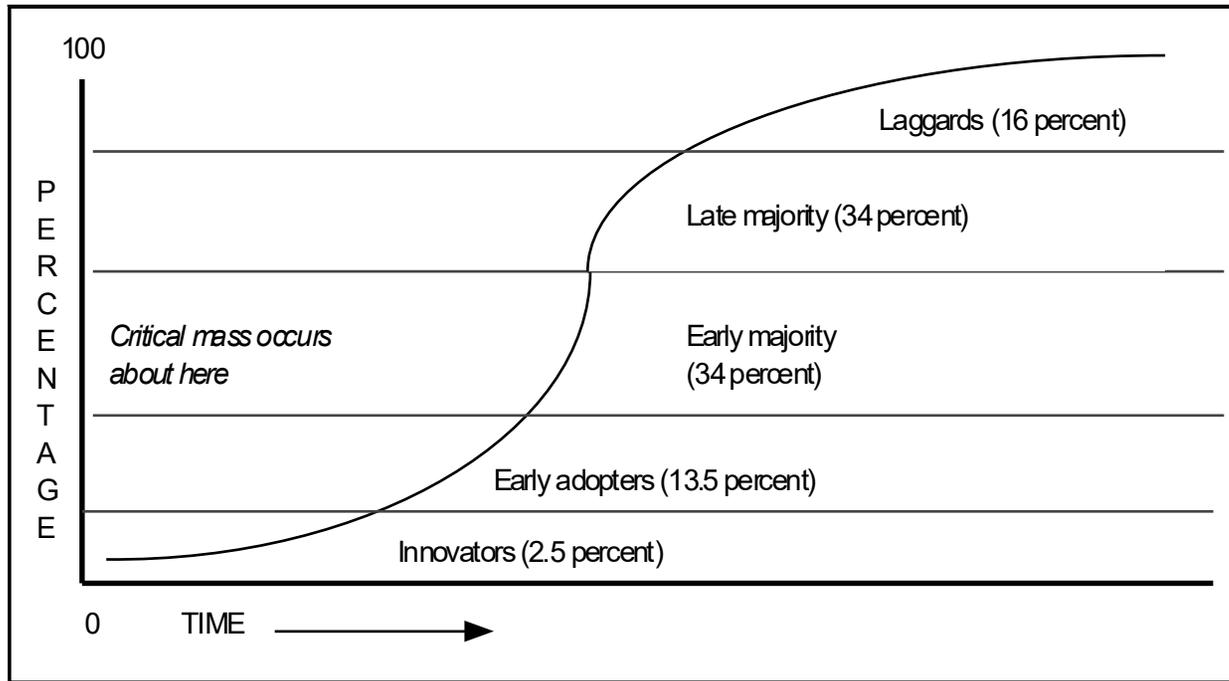
havior tends to be imitated by others in their system" (Rogers, 1995, p. 119). The communication channel includes a multi-step process with all types of intermediaries between the media and audience's decision-making.

Opinion leaders exert influence on audience behavior with personal contact but intermediaries, called change agents and gatekeepers, are also included in the diffusion process. "Professionals who can encourage opinion leaders to accept or reject an innovation are known as change agents while gatekeepers are persons who can control the flow of information to a group" (Rogers, 1995, p. 148).

These key elements make diffusion theory the obvious starting place for explaining the achievement or failure of a new product or idea or an organization's effort to communicate with the public about its image or product. It has been my observation that a new innovation spreads when others observe the early adopters and imitate them to replicate their profits or communicate with the early adopters and are persuaded or induced to adopt. Rogers and other limited effects theo-

rists say the media has little influence beyond the early adopters. Which of the key elements has the greatest impact on influencing adoption? It is hard to say. The characteristics of an innovation itself can influence its adoption but many other diffusion factors have an equal impact. As Rogers points out, "getting a new idea adopted, even when it has obvious advantages, is very difficult. Many innovations require a lengthy period, often many years, from the time they become available to the time they are widely adopted. Therefore, a common problem is how to speed up the rate of diffusion of an innovation" (Rogers, 1995, p. 1).

An innovation is "an idea, practice or object perceived as new by an individual or social unit" (Rogers, 1995, p. 11). "Innovations that are perceived by individuals as having great relative advantage, compatibility, trailability, observability and less complexity will be adopted more rapidly than other innovations" (Rogers, 1995, p. 16). These five qualities are the most important characteristics of innovations in explaining the rate of adoption.



## The Diffusion Curve

Rogers' S-shaped diffusion curve charts the diffusion of all types of innovations and ideas. This curve identifies the gap between early adopters and the late majority as critical mass-- "the point at which enough individuals have adopted an innovation so that the innovations further rate of adoption becomes self-sustaining" (Rogers, 1995, p. 314). Crossing that gap means recognizing social and psychological factors which underlie an innovations spread and the way these factors combine to create a gap between early adopters and others in society.