

THE INFLUENTIALS:

ONE AMERICAN IN TEN TELLS THE OTHER HOW TO VOTE,
WHERE TO EAT, AND WHAT TO BUY

BY: ED KELLER AND JON BERRY

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The Influentials is both a qualitative and quantitative analysis studying the ten percent of Americans whom authors Ed Keller (CEO of RoperASW), and Jon Berry (senior researcher at Roper Reports), call the "early majority." These Americans set the trends for both community involvement and consumer response by making recommendations to friends and family based on their own experience of an event or product. Such persons are often the first to try new products or to determine a course of action needed in a community. The book's cover title describes an Influential succinctly and dramatically, "One American in ten tells the other nine how to vote, where to eat, and what to buy. They are *The Influencers*."

Keller, Berry, and dozens of other researchers compiled their project from the Roper Reports, which began to survey American attitudes and behaviors in 1973. Roper Reports documented consumer trends, health issues, media, travel, personal appearance, politics, values, and aspirations (339). In-person surveys were based on a cross-section of 2000 adult Americans, representing the population of the United States. The information and analysis provided in this study describe a phenomenon that both the market economy and the world of politics can scarcely ignore. The authors successfully show how various products and community developments have prospered primarily because of Influential word-of-mouth. Other products and projects have failed when Influentials have not endorsed them. These informal leaders tend to be two to five years ahead of the general public on important trends, while disparaging political and marketplace hype at the same time (15, 25).

The study is outlined systematically. First, the authors ask who the Influentials are and what their personalities are like,

claiming that these are the people who make the society, culture, and marketplace run (1). Influential Americans are not necessarily famous or infamous; they are simply people who are interested in many subjects and have a significant network of relationships. Influentials are 50:50 male-female, express themselves articulately, and tend to be activists in their community. They are restless and always seeking to learn new subjects. They also are impatient with restrictions on their lives. For example, the Influentials were the first to start flying again after 9/11/2001.

Second, Keller and Berry describe how Influentials form and share their ideas. These Americans use multiple sources of information, rating word-of-mouth or personal research higher than media. They believe in sharing what they know with others in terms of recommendations and advice. However, Influentials do not go out of their way to keep up with new products, but look for those products or policies that make a substantial contribution to their lives. Finally, Influentials trust their instincts.

Third, Influentials are sending a message to the American culture. The early 21st century is an Age of Autonomy with emphasis on self-reliance and grassroots activism. Indeed, the rate of volunteerism rose four percent in the last 13 years. Influentials are no longer interested in traditional thinking or vested interests. They do not wish to be involved in mainstream religious or political groups, but rather believe that they can make a significant difference in people's lives "on the edges" (200). They attend more meetings, yet like meetings less. They are interested in processes rather than loyalty and are self-organizing simply to accomplish a goal. Influentials also wish to correct government excesses and to look inward for solutions to community and family problems (175).

Keller and Berry conclude their research with two chapters outlining trends for the future and a strategy for development that is important for connecting with Influentials. They propose that seven trends led by Influentials will mark the near future: (1) focus on legacy left to children; (2) importance of global connections for lifestyle and belief systems; (3) fast-paced living punctuated by intentional

personal time; (4) PC-centered world; (5) living longer; (6) an emphasis on privacy, and (7) acknowledgement of the limits of convenience offset by quality of product (fast food consumption is declining in the Influential realm).

Strategies for connecting with Influentials include being where the most accurate and helpful information exists. These include: listening to critics, getting out into the community by being active in a cause that benefits people's lives, making life easier for individuals and families, paying attention to the exceptions to the rule, and developing a brand of good value accompanied by communication about it.

Keller and Berry use significant quantitative sociological insights to generate profiles of influential Americans. Their claim that Influentials ultimately define what is important to society, albeit informally, reassures us that hierarchical models of decision-making are no longer as effective as they once were. My hunch is that Keller and Berry have a message for the church, one that is found primarily in their statistical tables and conclusions about what is meaningful to the Influential and how the Influential will have a significant impact on others around him or her about values and participation. With the claim that orthodoxy is no longer of value to the Influential, I wonder if the church will need to rethink its understanding of "reclaiming the Bible" or "getting back to theological basics." Perhaps Keller and Berry are telling us that global vision, in-depth and informed theological thinking, and leaving a meaningful legacy are now the important attributes for a religious community.

The impact of this research and possible conclusions for the church might have a significant "influence" on seminary training. With church growth models dominating the minds of judicatories and many mainline churches in the United States, instructors will need to think about the contrast between values claimed by Influentials, such as grassroots self-reliance versus top-down pre-packaged success models. While Influentials will not be the sole definers of ecclesiology, they are, in fact, defining much of the nature of American thinking. Indeed, there are church leaders who are Influentials. Perhaps seminaries and judicatories in listening to them, combined with introducing praxis connected with emotional intelligence

(see *Primal Leadership* by Daniel Goleman et al.), might have a better understanding of what the future will look like as we continue striving to build effective and meaningful church in today's world.

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