

## SUMMARY: DIFFUSION PROCESS<sup>1</sup>

**Stages:** People go through several stages in learning about and in adopting new ideas. These stages may be classified as:

- awareness
- interest
- evaluation
- trial
- adoption
- (reinforcement)

**Channels:** Mass media make their greatest impact in the awareness and in the interest stages. Colleagues, neighbors and friends are most important as sources of information in the evaluation stage. In the trial stage industry organizations, professional societies, neighbors and friends are important. If commercial products are involved, dealers and salesmen are important as sources of information in this stage.

There are also variations in the types of communication used according to the nature of the change.

The adoption of a new idea follows a sequence of influences from the time an idea is formed until it becomes generally accepted.

**People:** In this diffusion process people may be classified into types based upon the sequence in which they accept new ideas and practices:

- innovators
- early adopters (community adoption leaders)
- early majority (local adoption leaders)
- late majority (later adopters)
- laggards (non-adopters)

**Leadership roles:** One of the functions of leaders is to diffuse new ideas and practices. The task is: expedite the process of getting ideas from their sources of origin to those who can use them. (Put another way, to transmit ideas from their sources to the people you hope will use them.)

To succeed in this process, you must know what techniques to use at the different stages and how to mobilize them effectively.

It is important to know in which stages in the diffusion process the people are. It is obviously wasteful to ask people to try something when they know nothing about it. It is also a waste of

energy to instruct people how to do something — information pertinent to the trial stage — when they aren't there yet, but are still at the interest stage, needing data about what the idea is.

**Working with informal leaders:** When you are attempting to influence change you must know how to use all the communications channels available. For example, informal leaders have contacts and influence with people which no other channels can provide. The most effective use of informal leaders requires working with them on an informal basis. Giving the informal leaders public recognition may jeopardize their position of leadership in their own groups and thereby weaken the influence which makes them important for you.

**To be effective** in diffusion of new ideas (or products) you must understand

- The nature of the acceptance process
- The values and aspirations of the people with whom you must work
- The formal and informal group relationships within the area
- The availability and most appropriate use of mass communications
- The sequence and interrelationships of influences in acceptance of new ideas.

**Values, aspirations, customs:** In addition to knowing how to use the various channels of communication in bringing about adoption of new ideas or practices, you must be sensitive to the customs, values and aspirations of the people in your various audiences. Changes are accepted when they support these values and aspirations. It is important to show how and to what extent the changes fit into those values and aspirations. If people want to be debt-free, show how the new practice will help reach that goal. If they value material conveniences, show how the new practice will help them obtain those conveniences. If they value individual liberty, community growth, preserving our form of government, preserving their way of life, opportunity for their children, other expressed or implied goals — make the connection.

**Finally,** the person attempting to speed up the process of acceptance of new ideas and practices must be aware of the total process and the sequence of influences at different points in this process. It is necessary to intermesh the impersonal with the personal and the technical with the nontechnical. In this sense the influencing of change is an art which requires sensitivity to the many phases of the acceptance process; it also requires the ability to make most effective use of the various means of influencing acceptance.

**Reinforcement:** The original research reports stopped with five stages. Peter Hollister adds another: reinforcement. He calls adoption the preliminary conclusion. If you are dealing with a product, the purchase may end your process. But if you are dealing with concepts or ideas, you may need to continue. The audience or the individual may not “stay adopted.” Hollister urges continued action to reach the level of commitment and advocacy of the idea to others.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Special Report No. 15, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University, and other sources by Ferne G. Bonomi.