

# ADWEEK

## Consumers Embrace Geekdom

### 'Geeks' are at the epicenter of social/technological innovation

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- Mark Dolliver



It's a geek world these days, and non-geeks just live in it. With new technology and the flow of information taking on unprecedented importance for consumers en masse, people once derided as geeks now find themselves at the vanguard of sweeping social change. And the number of people who've internalized at least some geek characteristics has grown to make them a majority of the online population, according to a study from Geeknet, which owns and operates such online geek venues as SourceForge and Slashdot. Its report gives a detailed look at this cohort, which is embracing its geekiness as never before.

Based on survey work conducted in tandem with Forrester Consulting in March and May in the U.S., Britain and Germany, the report says 66 percent of

online respondents have "geek tendencies." Thirteen percent are identified as "IT Geeks," meaning they work in information-technology roles or in other jobs involving computer hardware or software. Thirty-two percent are classified as "Tech Geeks."

These people don't work in IT-related jobs, but they display "Technology Enthusiasm" (i.e., they "feel technology is important to them and something that they follow and keep up with regularly. They are also very likely to purchase tech products and services."). Tech Geeks also exhibit "Geek Passion" (i.e., they "like to understand how things work, like to solve problems, and often find themselves explaining things to other people."). Twenty-one percent of the respondents are "Non-Tech Geeks," which means they "exhibit Geek Passion but do not work in IT or have Tech Enthusiasm."

#### A THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE

Reflective of Geek Passion, 85 percent of geeks, vs. 51 percent of non-geeks, agreed, "When I'm interested in something, I read a lot about it." Eighty-nine percent of geeks, vs. 47 percent of non-geeks, agreed that they "like solving problems. (Ninety-four percent of Non-Tech Geeks said this is true of them.) And 74 percent of geeks (vs. 41 percent of non-geeks) said, "There are things in my life that I try to know everything about."

As for Technology Enthusiasm, 75 percent of geeks (vs. 42 percent of non-geeks) subscribed to the statement, "Technology makes my life better." (The figure rose to 90 percent among respondents classified as Tech Geeks.) Seventy-three percent of geeks, vs. 24 percent of non-geeks, agreed that "New technology is fun or interesting." Typical of

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the difference between Non-Tech Geeks and their tech-oriented counterparts, just 14 percent of the Non-Techs agreed that they "enjoy reading about new technology products," vs. 81 percent of Tech Geeks and 65 percent of IT Geeks (as well as just 8 percent of non-geeks).

## A GEEK AND PROUD OF IT

If people were once reluctant to acknowledge such geek tendencies, that's no longer the case. Scott Kauffman, Geeknet's CEO, notes that terms like "geek" were almost always used pejoratively in the past. "We've certainly seen a turning of the corner -- more than a turning of the corner -- about that," he says. Geeks now embrace their geekiness, he says, "because there's a deep intelligence behind it." Often, people become geeks because they've immersed themselves deeply in one of their interests. In his own case, says Kauffman, "I used to call myself a music fan. Now I call myself a music geek."

## NOT AD-AVERSE

You might regard geeks as the sort of people who are dismissive of advertising and branding, but the survey findings indicate quite the reverse. For instance, when asked about various ways in which they might have reacted to online ads they saw in the past 12 months, 20 percent of geeks, vs. 12 percent of non-geeks, agreed, "Advertisements help me decide what to buy." (The figure rose to 23 percent among the Tech Geeks.) Twenty-five percent of geeks, vs. 16 percent of non-geeks, said they "Purchased the advertised product or service online." (Here again, the propensity was highest among Tech Geeks, at 29 percent.) And 25 percent of geeks, vs. 13 percent of non-geeks, said they "Didn't click on the ad, but later visited a Web site to get information about the product advertised." (Tech Geeks had the highest proportion of geek respondents doing this as well, at 29 percent).

This pattern carries over to geeks' attitudes about brands. Thus, 29 percent of geeks, vs. 14 percent of non-geeks, endorsed the statement, "Owning the best brand is important to me." Thirty-two percent of geeks, vs. 17 percent of non-geeks, agreed, "I would pay more for products consistent with an image I like." Brand loyalty is also (comparatively) alive and well among geeks: 60 percent of geeks, vs. 44 percent of non-geeks, agreed that "When I find a brand I like, I stick to it."

If such findings seem counterintuitive, they make more sense when you take into account the fact that

geeks are gluttons for data and put their information-gathering skills to work in choosing a brand in the first place. Having processed lots of information in making an initial brand choice, geeks have more reason to stick with it than is the case for someone who just blundered upon a brand without having invested much effort in its selection. "They take pride in using information to get the best products, which probably doesn't mean the most expensive," says Kauffman. "They're confident in the decisions they've made." He adds that Geeks' penchant for seeking what they regard as the best products and services also stems from the fact that they're in a better position than non-geeks to afford these things. "They have higher educations and higher incomes, so they've got the purchasing power," he notes.

And their penchant for gathering information makes them attentive (if not uncritically so) to advertising. "If the information is relevant to them -- no longer a 30-second spot, but more integrated into their lifestyle -- then their response is not so much 'I'm getting hit with a commercial message' as it is 'I'm getting information that's relevant to me,'" says Kauffman. But geeks will not be so receptive to the sort of old-fashioned, "top-down" sales pitch that fails to engage them on the basis of their own interests, even if it makes a pretense of doing so. "These are smart people," says Kauffman, "and their antennae are way up."

## DIVERSE PASSIONS

The range of products and services in which geeks are interested isn't confined to (though it certainly includes) technological items. According to Kauffman, it extends from Converse sneakers to Star

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Wars to (of all things) bacon. Why bacon? In a small way, it's a reflection of geeks' tendency to dive into their interests. They know bacon isn't particularly healthy, says Kauffman, but "if they're going to go off the rails, they do it with gusto."

Perhaps more predictably (and truer to stereotype), geeks regard themselves as fonts of wisdom. If that's perhaps tedious at times for their acquaintances, it's a boon for the brands they like. Sixty-one percent of geeks (vs. 40 percent of non-geeks) agreed that "I like to tell others when I make a smart buy"; 60 percent (vs. 30 percent of non-geeks) "often tell my friends about products that interest me." More broadly, 82 percent of geeks (vs. 50 percent of non-geeks) agreed, "My friends and family often turn to me for answers on topics I know a lot about." Modesty may not be their strong suit, as geeks were more than twice as likely as non-geeks (53 percent vs. 22 percent) to subscribe to the statement, "I feel that I am often the person who knows more detail about an interesting event or trend than others around me." Geeks were also twice as likely as non-geeks (70 percent vs. 35 percent) to agree, "I consider myself to be innovative."

When it comes to technology, the IT Geeks and Tech Geeks are particularly eager to share their know-how: 63 percent of the former and 74 percent of the latter agreed, "I often give advice to others on technology products and services." And, given the importance of technology these days for geeks and non-geeks alike, people are probably happy to tap into geek savvy. "Geeks are getting the last laugh here," says Kauffman. "Technology is no longer exclusionary. Geeks were there first, so now it's easy for them to be setting the agenda."

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