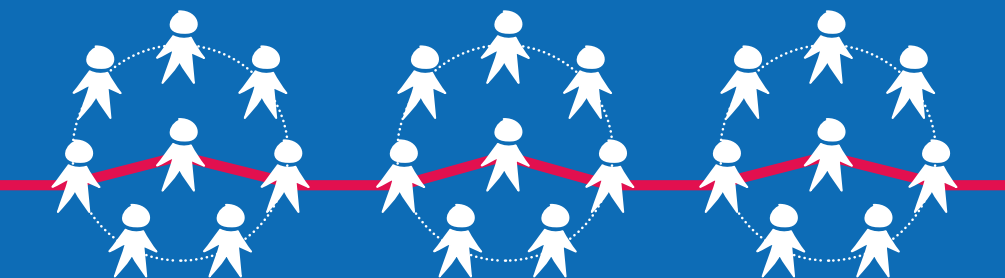


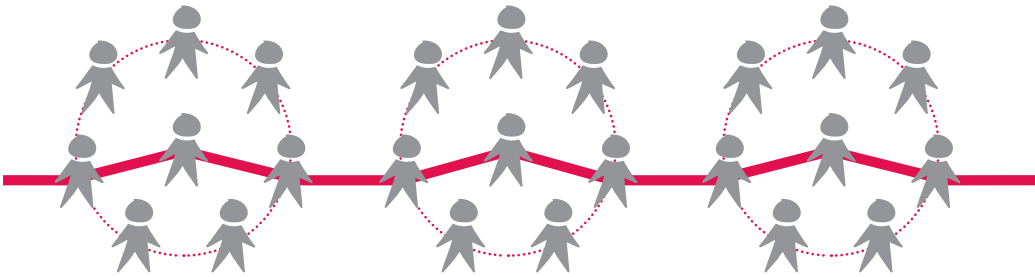
# GROUPED



How small groups of friends  
are the key to influence  
on the social web

PAUL ADAMS

# GROUPED



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the key to influence on the social web

PAUL ADAMS

New  
Riders

VOICES THAT MATTER™

*For Jenny. Thank you.*

**Grouped: How small groups of friends are the key to influence on the social web**

Paul Adams

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# INTRODUCTION

## Our world is changing

The world around us is changing rapidly. With the invention and rise of the web, we're seeing the largest increase in the amount of information accessible to us since the printing press was invented over 550 years ago. This is truly a revolutionary time, and it will test much of what we have accepted as fact for hundreds of years. There are four massive shifts that are shaping this new world.

The first shift is the rise in accessible information. The accessibility of information is increasing exponentially and is not going to stop within our lifetime. A single query into a search engine produces millions of results. People are adding information to Wikipedia faster than we can read it. Every single day, hundreds of millions of people post billions of distinct pieces of content online. All of this information is digital, and can be analyzed for patterns.

The second shift is a major change in the structure of the web. It's moving away from being built around content, and is being rebuilt around people. This is correlated with a major change in how people spend their time on the web. They're spending less time interacting with content, and more time communicating with other people.

The third shift is that for the first time, we can accurately map and measure social interaction. Many of our theories can now be quantitatively tested. This is incredibly exciting for researchers, but it will also transform how we think about marketing and advertising. Many things that were previously hard to measure, for example, word of mouth marketing, can now be analyzed and understood. We can now start to measure how people *really* influence other people, and it will change how we do business.

The fourth shift is the dramatic increase in our understanding of how we make decisions. In the past decade, we have learned more about the workings of the brain than in all the time before that. Many of our theories about rational thought have turned out to be false, and we have greatly underestimated the power of our nonconscious brain.

If we want to be successful in this new age of exponentially increasing information and a web built around people, we will need to understand social behavior. We will need to understand how people are connected, how they interact, and how they are influenced by different people in their lives. We will also need to understand how people make decisions, and how the different parts of their brain and their biases drive their behavior.

### **This book is a foundation upon which to build**

Each year, many thousands of research studies are carried out on social behavior. This book is not a comprehensive account of all these studies, which would take up thousands of pages, and would never be read by busy professionals. This book is a synthesis of key studies in related fields, summarized into actionable patterns. The goal of this book is to give people a foundational understanding of social behavior, and how it applies to the future of business.

Many of the examples in the book are from Facebook. Because I work there, I have access to many trustworthy case studies and examples that I can share with readers. Many of the Quick Tips apply just as well to activity on other social networks. The academic reader may at times feel that I have oversimplified, overgeneralized, and talked about causality when we may be dealing with correlation. But this simplification is necessary to make research actionable to business. In this case, I believe that perfect is the enemy of good. People who are busy creating products and building companies don't have time to read full

research papers, never mind try to synthesize them to find the larger patterns. But to be successful in reorienting their businesses around people, they need an actionable summary of this data—a foundation around which they can build a strategy. If you are that busy professional, this book is your foundation. It's the beginning, not the end.

## How to use this book

This book is your introduction to the patterns behind our social behavior. Humans are social creatures, and an understanding of social behavior on the web will soon be required knowledge for almost all businesses. This book is your guide for the exciting new world that we're collectively creating. I've attempted to write a book that will give you, in a matter of hours, all the basic information you need to rethink your business.

The book is made up of independent sections which are designed to be reused. I hope you find that these sections can be taken in isolation if you choose, and used as input to think of new ways in which your business might support social behavior. When you're creating your next product, your next marketing plan, your next advertising strategy, revisit the relevant sections and brainstorm around established patterns of social behavior.

If you want to get into the detail, I've included references to the main research studies I cite. This is not a comprehensive list, but the references included in these papers will lead you to many more related and fascinating research studies. Now let's get started by looking at how, and why, the web is being rebuilt around people.

4

# How our relationships influence us



# RELATIONSHIP TYPES AND PATTERNS

## We have unique relationships with everyone we know

Each relationship between two people is unique. We have histories with some people that include thousands of distinct interactions that have shaped how we feel about one another. We are closer to some people than others, including within our groups of friends. We trust some of our friends on certain topics, and trust others on different topics. We turn to some close friends in times of trouble, but don't feel comfortable turning to all of them equally. Each of these unique relationships heavily influence our behavior with others.

## We have different types of relationships

Although each relationship is unique, we can categorize some of their characteristics to help us understand them better. In their research, Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl identified eight different types of relationships:

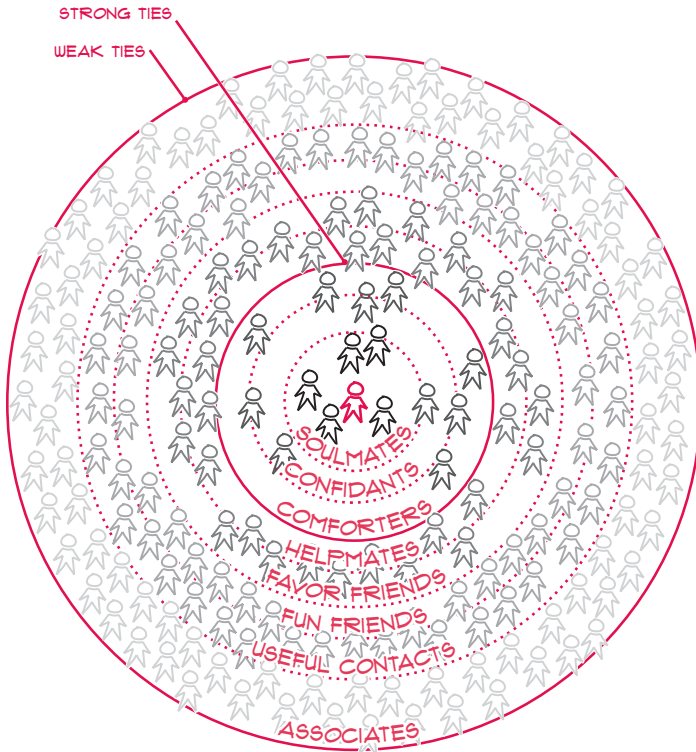
- *Associates* are people who don't know each other well, and only share a common activity, such as a hobby or a sport.
- *Useful contacts* are people who share information and advice. Typically this is related to our work or career.
- *Fun friends* are people who socialize together primarily for fun. They don't have a deep relationship, and don't provide each other with emotional support.

- *Favor friends* are people who help each other out in a functional manner but not in an emotional manner.
- *Helpmates* display characteristics of both favor friends and fun friends. They socialize together for fun and also help each other out in a functional manner.
- *Comforters* are similar to helpmates but with a deeper level of emotional support.
- *Confidants* disclose personal information to each other, enjoy each other's company, but aren't always in a position to offer practical help.
- *Soulmates* display all of these elements and are the people we're closest to.

We have a very small number of confidants and soulmates, often numbering fewer than five.

One of the most useful ways to understand our unique relationships is to look at them as strong ties and weak ties. This distinction has been extensively studied by social psychologists and anthropologists. Strong ties are the people you're closest to—your closest friends and family. Weak ties are people you don't know well. Often they include people you have met recently and have yet to form a strong relationship with, and people you know through others, such as friends of friends. Strong ties include our soulmates, confidants, and comforters. Weak ties include our helpmates, favor friends, fun friends, useful contacts, and associates. We'll explore both strong ties and weak ties later in this chapter.



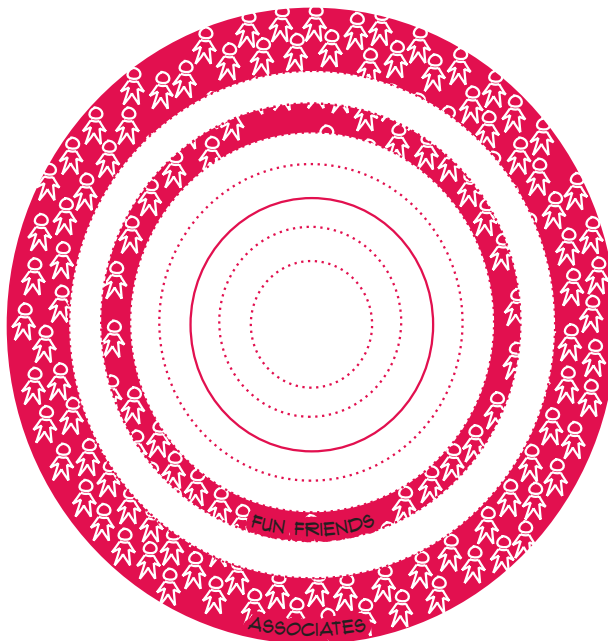


We have a much smaller number of strong ties than weak ties.

## We have different patterns of relationships

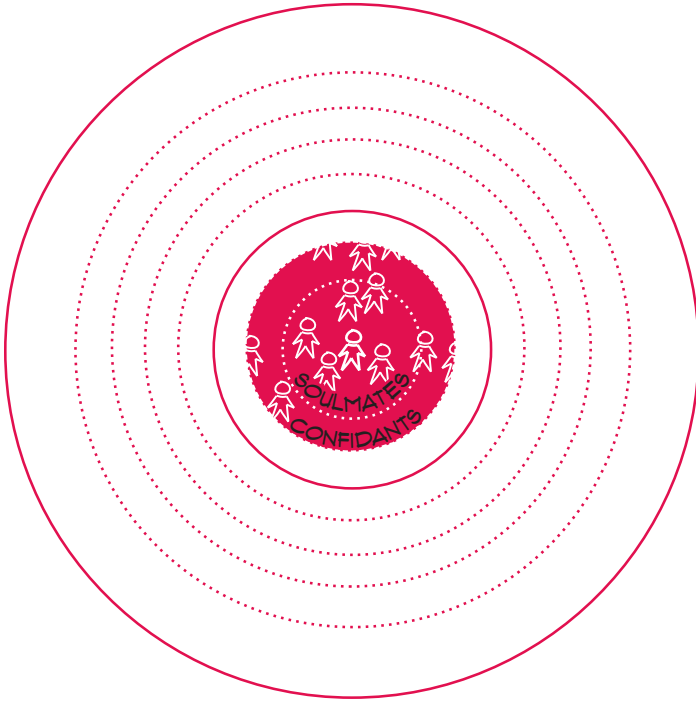
Researchers have observed different patterns of relationships. We've already seen one relationship pattern focused on the *structure* of the network, how our social network is broken up into independent groups numbering fewer than ten people. When studying the relationship patterns *within* the network, Spencer and Pahl found that people don't have friends from all eight friendship types. In fact, people tend to have friends from distinct groups of relationship types, and they identified four main patterns: Basic, Intense, Focal, and Broad.

Basic friendship patterns include people who only have simple friendships, usually fun friends and associates. They are not close to their family and often deal with emotional issues on their own.



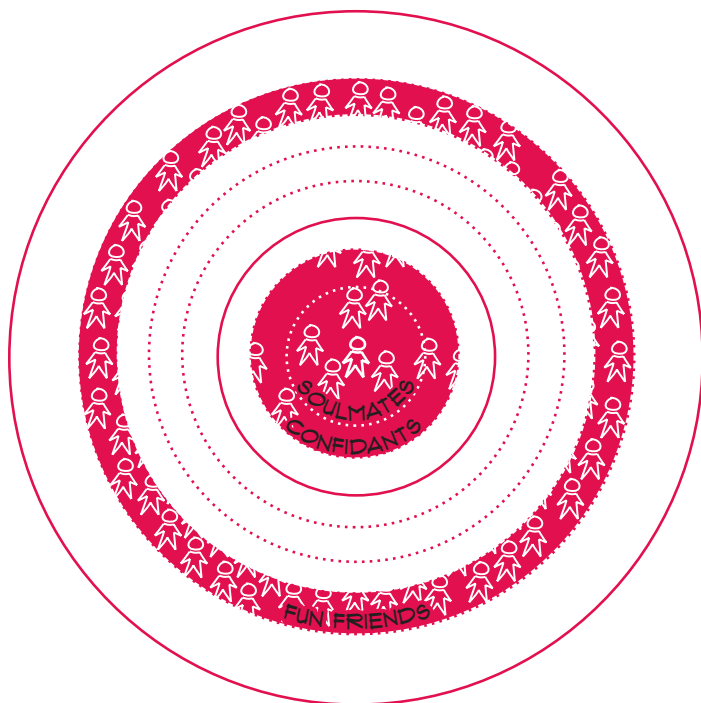
The basic friendship pattern.

Intense friendship patterns include people who only have complex friendships, usually confidants and soulmates. They make a clear distinction between “true friends” and other relationships such as acquaintances.



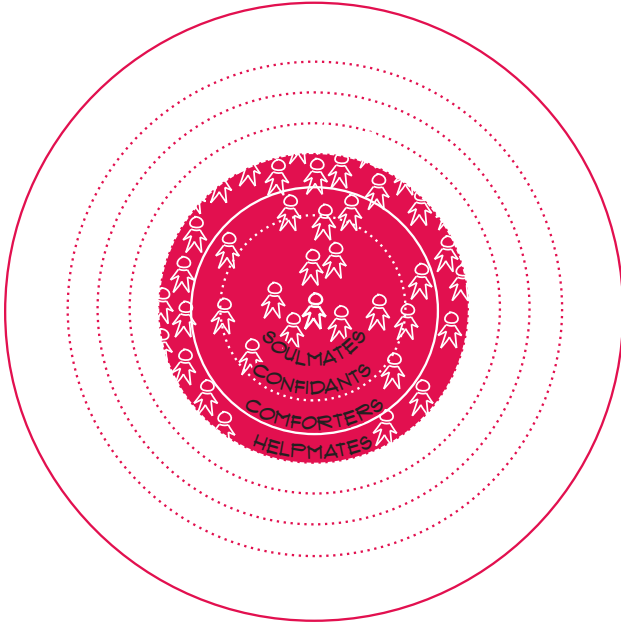
The intense friendship pattern.

Focal friendship patterns include people who have both simple and complex friendships. They usually have a small core of soulmates and confidants, and a much larger group of fun friends.



The focal friendship pattern.

Broad friendship patterns include people who have both simple and complex friendships, and who also include a wider range of friendship types. In this kind of pattern, fun friends may be outnumbered by helpmates or confidants, though soulmates rarely number more than one or two.



The broad friendship pattern.

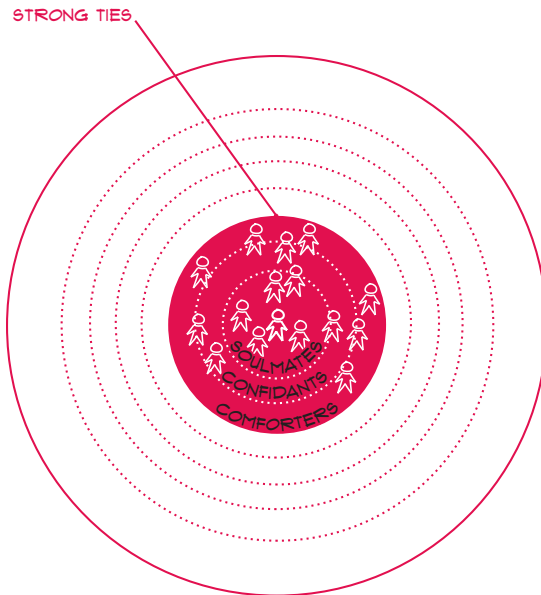
### QUICK TIPS

One common mistake is to design for all relationship types. Something designed for close friends to interact will look very different from something designed for friends of friends to interact, which will look different again from something designed for strangers to interact. To be successful, choose the relationship type that's most important for you and design for that.

# STRONG TIES

## Strong ties are the people we care about most

Strong ties are our closest friends and family. They are the people we trust the most, and the people we turn to for emotional support. Strong ties are very important for maintaining our wellbeing. Research has shown that people with strong ties have lower incidents of heart disease, and get fewer cases of colds and the flu.<sup>2</sup> Family members are disproportionately represented among our strong ties. Our strong ties include friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors, and family can sometimes represent up to half of our strong ties, despite there being many fewer family members than non-family members in our social network. When all else is equal, family gets preference.



Strong ties are often described as the people in our “inner circle.”

## We only have a small number of strong ties

Most people have fewer than ten strong ties, and many have fewer than five. We keep our circles of trust very small. One study of 3,000 Americans found that they had between two and six strong ties.<sup>3</sup> A study conducted in 2002 and 2007 found that people had about ten friends and family they meet or speak with at least weekly.<sup>4</sup> Another study of 5,124 adults found that the average number of strong ties was eleven.<sup>4</sup>

## Most of our communication is with strong ties

Studies into communication have found that the majority of communication is with the people who are emotionally closest to us, the people most likely to reciprocate our attention.<sup>5</sup> On average, we have ongoing communication with between seven and fifteen people, but 80 percent of that is with the same five to ten people.<sup>6</sup> Eighty percent of our phone calls are to the same four people.<sup>7</sup> Aside from face to face interaction, people communicate with their strong ties primarily through voice calls and text messages, as they view those as being the most reliable communication channels. However, as more people use social networks, and more people have always-on access to social networks on their phones, communication with strong ties on social networks is increasing. Research on social networks has shown that they are primarily being used to strengthen existing relationships rather than build new relationships. In fact, the more people see each other in person and communicate on the phone, the more they communicate online.<sup>8</sup>

On average, people have 160 friends on Facebook yet communicate directly with only four to six of them.<sup>9</sup> We consume updates from many more than that, but when it comes to wall posts, private messages, instant messages, likes, and comments on others' posts, we only communicate with an average of four people per week and six people per month.<sup>9</sup> This is despite the fact that we're checking Facebook

almost every day. Another research study tried to understand how many people we spend time with offline by analyzing the tags in Facebook photos. It found that the average person was tagged with six to seven other people.<sup>10</sup> All this data on social network interaction closely reflects our offline life, where many of us have fewer than five strong ties. We're communicating with the same small number of strong ties online as well as offline.<sup>11</sup>

### Our strong ties have disproportionate influence over us

Research on decision making has consistently found that we are disproportionately influenced by the people we're closest to emotionally. The strongest influence is between mutual best friends.<sup>12</sup> We're three to five times more likely to share similar preferences with our friends than with strangers.<sup>13</sup> This is not new. Research on voting in the 1940s showed that people were much more heavily influenced by who their family and close friends were voting for than they were by the media.<sup>14</sup> These patterns have held despite the vast changes in technology in the last 70 years. In independent studies, Forrester, Polara, and Edelman all found that people were three to four times more likely to trust a friend or acquaintance than a blogger or expert for product purchase advice.<sup>15, 16, 17</sup> Research on social networks has shown that people only influence, and are influenced by, a small number of other people.<sup>18</sup> Other research has shown that we are influenced by the people that surround us, which often tends to be our strongest ties.<sup>19</sup>

### New tools will emerge around strong ties that will change how we buy things

We trust our strong ties, and are more likely to let them know intimate details of our life. This can include what we do, where we go, what we buy, and what we decide not to buy. Assuming they give us permission, in the future we'll be able to see which



of our friends have visited certain locations, stores, or websites, and what products or services they bought. We'll be able to see how they rated the experience, and if they haven't explicitly given a rating, we'll be able to directly reach out to them and solicit advice about our potential purchases. All products and services will be filtered through the previous experiences of our friends.

### QUICK TIPS

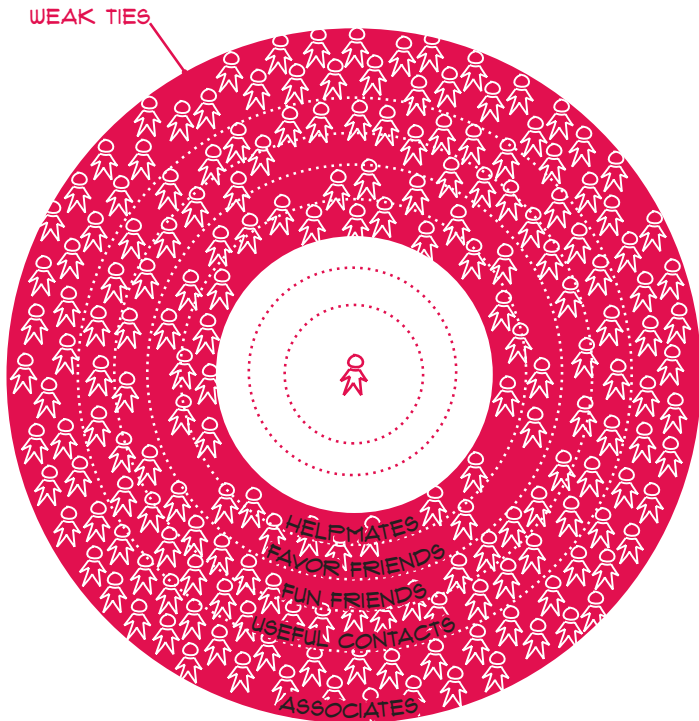
Make it easy for people to get feedback from strong ties on potential purchases by supporting the established communication channels they use: voice calls, text, email, Facebook.

Build campaigns around strong ties, as these are the people who have the most influence over us. For example, seeing more information about a small number of close friends is likely to be more important to people than less information about more people they don't know as well.

## WEAK TIES

### Weak ties are people we don't know very well

Weak ties are often friends of friends, or people we met recently. We would describe many of our weak ties as acquaintances. We communicate with most of our weak ties infrequently, often going months or even years without direct interaction. We know who our weak ties are, we know them by name and can recognize them, but we don't know much about many of them. We have hundreds of weak ties, but as we saw earlier, we can only keep up to date with about 150 of them.



Weak ties are people we don't know so well.

Online social networks are making it easier to feel connected to many of our weak ties. Although we may not interact directly, we can more easily follow what is happening in their lives than we could before these tools existed, when we relied on gossip to stay up to date. This also introduces some awkward social exchanges that don't exist offline. People are often worried about whether to accept a friend request, or delete a contact, in case they meet that person again. The binary nature of our online tools misses all the subtlety and nuance of our offline interactions with weak ties.

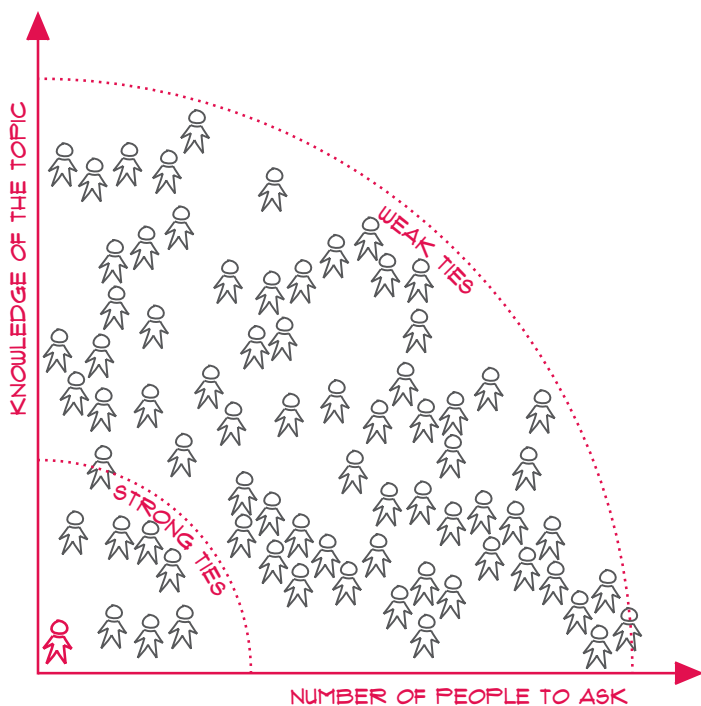
We usually interact with weak ties because of a common interest or object. This could mean meeting up via a mutual friend. Or it could mean interacting because we need to complete a shared task. Other times it might be because we share a hobby or are on the same sports team, or because we're seeking information.

## Weak ties can be powerful sources of information

In his seminal research paper on strong and weak ties, sociologist Mark Granovetter found that weak ties are often a better source of information than strong ties.<sup>20</sup> Our weak ties are at the periphery of our social network, which means they are connected to more diverse sets of people than our strong ties, which are more central in our network. These diverse ties pass on more novel information, and so they can often know more than our strong ties do. Our unconscious brain detects this pattern, and instructs us to start searching for information two or three degrees away from us to ensure that we are receiving new information. This pattern has been observed with many things, including finding a new job or finding a good piano teacher.<sup>21</sup>

One downside to sourcing information from our weak ties is that we know less about their knowledge and whether we can trust their judgment. Their credibility is not as well defined as our strong ties. Because of this, surfacing information about our weak ties will be crucial for encouraging interactions between people. We will need to know that our weak ties are qualified to talk about specific topics, and that they are trustworthy.

What this translates to is that encouraging interactions between weak ties is good for business. Research has shown that increases in positive online comments appear a month or two before an increase in market share.<sup>22</sup>



When people are looking for information and opinions from others, they look to their strong ties first because they know they can trust them, even though there are weak ties that have higher knowledge on the topic.

### QUICK TIPS

When creating content, consider that although people's weak ties may be more knowledgeable than their strong ties, they may trust them less. It is important to maximize the amount of trust between people. Some ways of doing this include showing their other shared ties, emphasizing their common interests, or exposing their sources of knowledge.

## HOW RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE

Our strong and weak ties change slowly over time, often over the course of many years. We meet new people throughout our lives and become closer to some more than others. As we have limited capacity for maintaining stable social relationships, we drift away from other people who we were close to in the past. Some of our weak ties become strong ties as some of our strong ties become weak ties. Sociologist Peter Marsden found that the number of our strong ties decreases gradually as we get older, and this varies depending on whether people went to university or tended to move around and live in different places. People with higher education tended to have double the number of strong ties as those who didn't finish high school.<sup>23</sup>

In their research on friendship, Spencer and Pahl found that some people have bounded relationships where friends are made at a particular life stage and new people remain acquaintances, while others have serial relationships where friends are replaced at each life stage. Others have evolving patterns, where new friends are added at each life stage, but some remain from previous life stages.<sup>1</sup>

### QUICK TIPS

We need to keep lists of people, whether that's in a social web application, or a customer marketing database, up to date. We need to know whether people still turn to the same people they did in the past, and whether their trusted sources have changed.

## SUMMARY

We have unique relationships with everyone we know and these relationships heavily influence how we behave around others.

One of the most useful ways to think about our unique relationships is to look at them in terms of strong ties and weak ties. Strong ties are the people you're closest to. Weak ties are people you don't know very well.

Many research studies have found that most people have fewer than ten strong ties, and many have fewer than five. We keep our circles of trust very small. The majority of communication is with our strong ties. With a majority of our attention focused on strong tie relationships, it's no surprise that we are disproportionately influenced by the people we're closest to emotionally.

Our weak ties are our acquaintances, and we communicate with them infrequently. Weak ties are often a better source of information than strong ties because they are connected to more diverse sets of people than our strong ties, and these diverse ties pass on more novel information. Hence they can often know more than our strong ties do.

## FURTHER READING

1. See the book *Rethinking Friendships: Hidden Solidarities Today* (Princeton, 2006) by Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl.
2. In his book *Viral Loop: From Facebook to Twitter, How Today's Smartest Businesses Grow Themselves* (Hyperion, 2009), Adam Penenberg reviews research studies, including a decade-long Australian study, that indicate how strong friendships are related to better health.

3. In their book *Connected* (Little, Brown, 2009), Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler describe one study they conducted with 3,000 Americans.
4. See research conducted at the Center for the Digital Future at the University of Southern California ([digitalcenter.org](http://digitalcenter.org)) in 2002 and 2007.
5. See the 2009 research paper “Social networks that matter: Twitter under the microscope” by researchers at HP Labs.
6. See the article “The small size of our communication network” by Stefana Broadbent on [usagewatch.org](http://usagewatch.org).
7. This data is from ethnographer Stefana Broadbent’s presentation at the TED conference 2009, viewable on YouTube. Broadbent has done much research into how people communicate with each other. You can follow her work at [usagewatch.org](http://usagewatch.org).
8. See the 2006 report “The strength of internet ties” by the Pew Research Center.
9. Data from internal analysis at Facebook.
10. See the study on Facebook photo tags described in *Connected* (see Item 3 above).
11. Various research shows that almost all friends on Facebook are people who users first met offline. For an overview, see the 2009 research paper “The problem of conflicting social spheres” by researchers at Manchester Business School.
12. In their book *Connected* (see Item 3 above), Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler describe how mutual best friends are most influential, how three degrees of influence works, and the concept of hyperdyadic spread.
13. See research referenced by Andy Sernovitz in *Word of Mouth Marketing* (Kaplan, 2009).

14. See Paul Lazarsfeld's research from the 1940s and 1950s, in particular the books *The People's Choice* (Columbia University, 1944) and *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (University of Chicago Press, 1954).
15. See Jeremiah Owyang's 2008 post "Who do people trust? (It ain't bloggers)" on his blog at [web-strategist.com](http://web-strategist.com).
16. The Edelman Trust Barometer 2008 study.
17. Pollara.ca doesn't give access to the study but you can read more about it in the Read Write Web article "Study: There is no tipping point, blog readers are skeptical."
18. See the 2009 research paper "Effects of word-of-mouth versus traditional marketing: Findings from an internet social networking site," by Michael Trusov, Randolph Bucklin, and Koen Pauwels.
19. See Peter Marsden's article "Core discussion networks of Americans" in *American Sociological Review*, 1987.
20. See Mark Granovetter's 1973 full research paper "The strength of weak ties."
21. Granovetter (see Item 20) studied how people look for new jobs, and Christakis and Fowler (see Item 12) studied how people found a new piano teacher.
22. See research described by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff in their book *Groundswell* (Harvard Business Press, 2008).
23. See Peter Marsden's 1987 full research paper "Core discussion networks of Americans."





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