

How Nerds Won the Culture

There's a common trope that the popular kids in school will end up working for the nerds a few years after graduation.

That may be true enough. But I think in the last 10 years, the nerds have won in another important way: culture.

It turns out that nerds are cultural early adopters as well as technical early adopters.

In the late 20th century, nerds were the first to adopt computers and video games. They loved fantasy and sci-fi first. They created subcultures based on interest and imagination, and they suffered for it through social mockery and social exclusion.

Of course, the nerds were mostly right.

Now we live in a world in which some of the highest-grossing movies are about comic book heroes. Everyone plays video games. Nerds and geeks run some of the highest-growth and highest-impact companies in our culture. Fantasy has gone mainstream with shows like *Game of Thrones*, and sci-fi is now a staple on television and at theaters.

In other words, the nerds have won their greatest victory not through one-upping the jocks. They won through clearly evangelizing new bits of technology and new bits of culture. They also won through predicting the rise of computers accurately. But it was their passion and obsessive interest – the kind that makes them so easy to mock – that actually makes them such effective evangelists for the adoption of such technology.

Word of mouth and referrals/recommendations are powerful channels for marketing. In fact, they're your most important and most efficient ways to reach new customers.

If your culture or product or idea is adopted by nerds and loved by nerds, you can expect free word of mouth. Of course, a nerd talking a product or a practice or an idea is not likely to affect the CEO of Coca-Cola. But if a nerd's evangelism works on the friends' nephew's coworker, then the nerd-beloved idea or culture or product has been given one extra life. It's that much more likely to go viral, and if there's a good enough reason for people who trust you to make an introduction for you, it may eventually affect the CEO of Coca-Cola.

Nerds are not the best networkers. But nerds are just insistent and stubborn enough with their evangelism that, given enough time, they are perhaps better positioned than any other subgroup to change the culture forever.

So maybe it's time for us to throw in our towels and say proudly that we are, indeed, nerds

ourselves (we prefer the term “culture early adopters”).

Maybe it’s time for us to learn a few product/market evangelism tips from our namesakes.