



Trends in Influencer Marketing

While it may seem like it's a 21st-century thing, influencer marketing has been around since the early 20th century. One of the earliest influencers was Santa Claus, a character modernized and reinvented by Coca-Cola. Today's influencers tend to be real people—PewDiePie, Logan Paul, Zoella, and others—many who leapt to fame thanks to the wide reach of social media channels, such as YouTube and Instagram. But influencers today come in a lot of forms depending on the target audience. Businesses, products, and services of all types leverage the audience, reach, and endorsement power of influencers to grow awareness and preference for what they have to offer.

THE STATE OF INFLUENCERS IN 2020

The influencer landscape has shifted significantly over the past few years as government agencies—such as the FDA and the FTC—have stepped in to regulate what can be a tricky landscape for consumers as they try to separate hype from fact. Their primary focus is on transparency—that consumers can readily identify whether influencers are receiving some form of payment or benefit from posting about specific brands or products. In the “old days,” advertisements were required to be labeled as such, and spokespeople were obligated to reveal their relationships with a brand or product. That all became a little murky when digital influencers emerged. Granted, steps have been taken to clamp down on influencers who receive compensation of some kind—whether it's monetary or in the form of free products.

“With recent changes to FTC endorsement guidelines, it's important to sweat the legal stuff when it comes to influencer marketing,” says Izzy Jack, a digital marketing specialist with Epic Marketing. “Influencer marketing often seems casual and organic—which is part of what makes it great. However, it's important to ensure that influencers clearly identify sponsored content accordingly.”

Despite heightened scrutiny, the use of influencers is significant, particularly among B2C brands, according to Talkwalker's report, “The Global State of PR.” Its recent study of marketing and communications professionals in the U.S., Europe, Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, Latin America, and the Middle East reveals that influencer marketing is considered to be a form of PR by 87% of MarCom (marketing communication) pros. Facebook and Instagram are the two top platforms used by influencers; however, 41% of respondents

also indicate that they have influencers attend events, 30% have them participate in affiliate marketing programs, 29% use them for social media takeovers, and 20% use them for stunts or viral videos. When used within the parameters of FDA and FTC guidelines, influencer marketing can provide big benefits. Here are some best practices for leveraging this popular PR tool effectively.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

It's common marketing wisdom that applies to the world of influencers as well as it does to any form of marketing communication designed to achieve measurable results: Know your audience—and what matters to and moves them. “It's crucial to understand your target audience before you engage with influencers,” says Robert Harles, managing director and global lead of social media at Accenture Interactive. It's also important to ask some key questions at the outset, he says, such as:

- What is important to the audience?
- What motivates them?
- Where do they congregate?
- Whom do they listen to and why?
- What content are they thinking about sharing?
- Why is that content compelling?

A focus on what may be interesting, relevant, and valuable to your audience is key.

START WITH WHAT YOU HAVE

“The best influencer program is generally one that focuses first on people who care about your brand already,” says Harles. These are your satisfied customers and brand ambassadors—and, importantly, according to influencer marketing experts, you must maintain the right focus.

“It's important to only leverage influencers that are relevant to your company's brand identity,” says Jack. “It's better to partner with an influencer that is hyper relevant to your industry than one that has a widespread general reach. Even if their audience is smaller, a niche-relevant influencer with a smaller following will do more for your brand than a big-name influencer with a massive—but general—audience.” Micro-influencers, he says, are a great alternative to celebrity influencers for many businesses and brands.

Paige Arnof-Fenn, founder and CEO of Mavens & Moguls, agrees. “My best tip for a successful influencer marketing campaign is to utilize a mix of influencer types,” she advises. “Instead of just focusing on the most popular/branded individual influencers, include internal experts, micro-influencers, niche experts, prospects, and customers in your influencer marketing mix.” These varied perspectives, Arnof-Fenn says, can help to enrich the discussion and generate more online activity.

“When I started my marketing career in 1990, there was no social media, and brands had to pay a lot of money to celebrities to endorse their products,” Arnof-Fenn recalls. “Today, small businesses can successfully advertise and promote their brands online without spending tons on traditional media by leveraging the internet and online marketing.”

PRACTICE TRANSPARENCY

The most successful influencer marketers are those who practice transparency—not only because it’s legally required, but also because of the potential detrimental brand impact of being less than honest with your audience.

Your relationship with influencers needs to be fully disclosed to your audience, Harles warns. “It’s not recommended to post content from a celebrity or major social influencer unless their connection, or lack of connection, with the brand is disclosed,” Harles says. “It’s also important to declare who owns the content, as well as the intellectual property ownership, copyright, and attribution.”

A CASE STUDY

Brian Lim is the founder and CEO of iHeartRaves, a curator of all-over print clothing. The company’s Instagram page has amassed almost 530,000 followers; influencers are used as part of its digital marketing strategy to fashion-oriented people who attend music festivals and enjoy electronic dance music. Lim says, “We engage in influencer marketing in a variety of ways. We find popular accounts that meet our criteria for selection, and we start a conversation to gauge whether or not it’s a good fit. Oftentimes, we will send one of our products to an influencer for free, in exchange for an honest review that is posted to their blog or social media followers. In the case of Instagram, this leads to a ton of new followers for us, as well as sales.”

The company has also created its own group of brand ambassadors—the Unicorn Crew, which represents iHeartRaves at music festivals around the country. “The Unicorn Crew goes to the music festival together and they wear matching iHeartRaves outfits,” says Lim. “They interact with attendees while

LINKS TO THE SOURCE

“A Brief History of Influencer Marketing”

influencerdb.com/blog/brief-history-of-influencer-marketing

“FDA Plans to Study Influencer Marketing”

mediapost.com/publications/article/346395/fda-plans-to-study-influencer-marketing.html

“FTC Votes to Review Influencer Marketing Rules & Penalties”

techcrunch.com/2020/02/12/ftc-influencer-marketing-law

Epic Marketing

marketingepic.com

“The Global State of PR”

talkwalker.com/case-studies/global-state-pr-2020

Accenture Interactive

accenture.com/us-en/services/interactive/marketing-content-engagement

Mavens & Moguls

mavensandmoguls.com

iHeartRaves

iheartraves.com

instagram.com/iheartraves

iheartraves.com/pages/unicorn-crew

promoting positive rave culture. They also provide coverage of the festival to the iHeartRaves social media networks. It’s a great way to spread information about our brand, but also about the lifestyle.”

The most important element of an influencer package, aside from cultural fit, Lim states, is the overall reach of the influencer’s blog or social media accounts. “We measure our return on investment based on the number of new followers we receive, the number of impressions we receive, how much referral traffic we get—and of course, how many sales come as a result of the campaign.”

Influencer marketing is still an effective way to connect with a wide range of audiences. The keys to success, though, are ensuring the right focus, following guidelines, and—as with any marketing endeavor—providing value to your audience.

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