

THE GROWING IMPACT AND IMPORTANCE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING

With the incredible rise of the short video-sharing app TikTok, podcasts solidifying themselves as part of our daily routines thanks to the pandemic, and Instagram becoming video-first and shopping-orientated – combined with consumers opting out of ads where possible – it has become more apparent than ever that brands are no longer directly talking to consumers, but rather consumers are talking to other consumers about brands. Essentially, we have arrived in a new era of media consumption, whereby consumers choose what they listen to and who they trust. This has had a knock-on effect on all businesses, which are now striving to seek and attain customer attention by producing appealing, entertaining content delivered via social media influencers.

The clear preference for peer recommendations is complemented by the psychology of trust influencers are known to uphold (especially when they have built up a substantial following), whereby their recommendations come off as more authentic. Brands are thus increasingly seeing how partnering with such individuals can significantly impact reach, conversion rates and overall sales. In this article, we take an in-depth look at exactly why influencer marketing has become a fundamental component of marketing strategies everywhere.

SO, WHAT EXACTLY IS A SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER?

According to Influencer Marketing Hub, a social media influencer is an individual who has built up a significant online following and reputation due to their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic. Posting regularly on their preferred social media channels – whether that is YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest or Twitter, for example – such individuals harness their reach, authenticity and personality to engage enthusiastic followers who pay close attention to their views. Trust is key here, and with influencers building up solid relationships with their followers, they are able to guide their audiences in their decision-making processes, namely those concerning their purchasing habits. Unlike mainstream celebrities, influencers don't shroud their lives in an air of mystery, instead leveraging the accessibility of social media to further personal connections with followers, which often leads to many being viewed as role models, with their lifestyles deemed as something to be replicated.

There are a number of ways to differentiate between the types of social media influencers – the most common methods being according to the content they produce, their level of influence, the niche in which they operate, and their follower numbers. Taking a look at the last option, we can see just how varied social media influencers can be.

Mega-influencers are those with at least one million followers on a single social media platform and are at the top of the ranking according to follower numbers. Notably, mega-influencers largely restrict collaborations to major brands that should be prepared to pay up to \$1 million per post. One step down are macro-influencers, boasting followers in the range of 40,000 and one million, followed by micro-influencers, who are made up of everyday people who have earned their presence online due to the knowledge they hold about a particular niche. The latter usually boast between 1,000 and 40,000 followers and are far more accessible for brands to engage.



However, they are also known to be picky, only agreeing to collaborations if a brand's values and products/services align with the interests of their existing target audience. For example, a popular fitness vlogger on YouTube possessing in-depth knowledge in weight training and nutrition would mostly stick to advertising for sportswear or supplement companies – it would be rare for them to step outside of their specialised subject and advertise make-up products, for instance. Furthermore, with the internet leading to the fragmentation of media into many small niche topics, micro-influencers are increasingly held to be the influencers of the future.

Lastly on the ranking by follower numbers are nano-influencers. They are the newest type to gain recognition, sporting a small follower count (fewer than 1,000) that are invested in the obscure or highly specialised field the nano-influencer is an expert in. Perfect for businesses that also produce incredibly niche products, nano-influencers carry tremendous sway with their keen and highly engaged followers. However, while they may be a cheaper option, for many companies, the reach of a nano-influencer is just not enough – as it would often require hundreds of collaborations and partnerships to garner a broad enough reach.

WHY INFLUENCER MARKETING IS SUCH A GAME-CHANGER

Firstly, to get an understanding of just how much influencer marketing has skyrocketed in popularity in recent years, let's take a look at some statistics. As highlighted by Influencer Marketing Hub: "The market grew from \$1.7 billion in 2016 to \$9.7 billion in 2020. In 2021, it soared to \$13.8 billion, indicating steady growth". This year, the market is projected to expand significantly, with experts deeming it will grow into a \$16.4 billion industry. The global pandemic catalysing social media consumption, of course, plays a major role here, but what is it exactly that makes this type of content marketing so attractive that businesses are continuously pumping money into strategies surrounding it?

ENHANCED AUTHENTICITY

Operating independently, social media influencers create their own content, integrating a company's advertising specifications into it. Importantly, when influencer marketing strategies are implemented correctly, the influencer remains in control of the brand's message, identifying the elements of the company that they and their followers identify with the most and then delivering content surrounding said element in the way they see fit. With it being widely known that followers can become weary of content that's overly "salesy" or features heavy product placement, it is ever-crucial that businesses treat influencers as autonomous creative partners who know their audience better than anyone else.

Factoring in this increased authority and combining it with the solid relationship an influencer has built up with their followers – who are most likely checking in with them every single day – an increased sense of authenticity is reached. This authenticity is the key to convincing audiences of the value of a brand and its products/services, and drives not only initial engagement on a brand's page but, significantly, those all-important monetary gains through sales. So, as Forbes indicates, "Instead of being sceptical of a commercial or a social media ad, consumers are trusting that if their influencer of choice loves the product, they will too". In fact, according to Influencer Marketing Hub, the majority of consumers prefer influencer-generated over brand-produced content – with 60% of marketers interviewed sharing that influencer content performs better and drives more engagement. The secret really does lie in the authenticity influencers promote – it builds an unmatched sense of trust that moves potential consumers to take action.



READILY AVAILABLE TARGET AUDIENCE

Today's technological advancements have seen consumers reap the benefits of unlimited freedom and choice regarding the content they wish to view across whatever social media platforms they prefer. What serves as an advantage for consumers, however, marks a serious problem for brands that now have to deal with their target audiences being spread out over various forms of media – something which makes them increasingly difficult to reach.

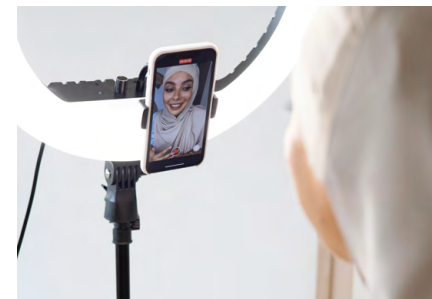
Presenting one solution to the growing problem, influencer marketing allows brands to locate and advertise directly to audiences sure to be interested in their products/services. For smaller businesses especially, this eliminates the need to allocate additional funds to testing and finding the right audiences – they are already readily available for use. Of course, the major consideration here is that the selected influencer has a following made up of 'real' people who are able to physically deliver the response a brand is hoping to achieve. Luckily, there are several free and paid automated tools at a brand's disposal that help determine whether an influencer's followers are fake, including FakeCheck, IG Audit and Social Audit Pro, as well as a number of manual processes able to weed out those bots.



WIDER MARKET REACH

As well as connecting brands to their target audiences, social media influencers enable companies to reach wider markets, boosting overall brand awareness online. When an influencer features a brand in their content, it is given that their already engaged followers will take notice. Consequently, said followers are also likely to share the content within their own networks, increasing brand exposure even further. And with many influencers sporting high follower counts comes the advantage of reaching a large number of people in just one post – with this one post capable of breaching the boundaries of a single social media platform and moving on to a second or even third.

Increased visibility and presence across a range of digital touchpoints and the opportunity to gain more traction are the results. As a thriving business feeds on continuously generating engagement, securing new sources through influencer marketing, in a way that helps brands become talking points everywhere, is of increasing interest. In fact, a recent Influencer Marketing Hub study found that 37% of respondents use influencer marketing to increase brand awareness, making it the most common objective. Thus, increasing customer databases by expanding existing audiences to include widened or new demographics is an essential component to marketing strategies, no matter the brand or industry in question.



ENRICHED CONTENT STRATEGY

Speaking of relevance, it cannot be understated how vital producing interesting and varied content on social media platforms is for brands. This is where user-generated content (UGC) comes in. It relates to any kind of original content – be it text, videos, images, audio or reviews – created by people rather than brands and published on social media. When looking through a marketing lens, this definition can be expanded to any content related to a brand that is voluntarily produced by its customers. An example provided by Forbes is the massive collection of visual content shared by GoPro owners. "Millions of customers are continually uploading jaw-dropping images and video that have the side benefit of promoting GoPro's products and features", highlights Forbes Council Member Danielle Wiley. Essentially, what is created is credible word-of-mouth recommendations that consumers increasingly respond to.

While UGC is free, brands do not have a say in how it is presented or who is sharing it. To overcome this hurdle, UGC can be applied to influencer marketing strategies, allowing brands to align with influencers whose aesthetics, audience and message delivery are ideally suited for optimal reach and engagement. Essentially, the two complement each other, with brands able to integrate an influencer's originally produced content spotlighting their products or services onto their own feeds. As once again indicated by Forbes: "With a little upfront strategy, influencer content can help foster more targeted and useful user-generated content over time". To support the creation of content, brands should design campaigns with inspiration in mind: tutorials, recipes and DIY tips are all examples that are sure to garner different responses from different types of influencers. The content they create acts as the perfect testimonial, which brands can share on their own platforms, enriching the very content they themselves produce.



CASE STUDIES

Still not convinced? Let's delve into some successful big-brand influencer marketing examples.

67 SHADES OF DIOR

The gold winner for the Best Beauty Campaign at the 2020 Influencer Marketing Awards, the 67 Shades of Dior Instagram campaign was curated to celebrate and drive global awareness of the luxury fashion and beauty house's launch of its Forever Foundation – a range boasting 67 unique foundation shades. Having teamed up with global influencer marketing agency Buttermilk – which specialises in influencer campaigns for the beauty, food and wellness sectors – Dior looked to highlight the brand's commitment to inclusivity with an ambassador to represent and educate others on each available shade and its defining properties (e.g. long-lasting coverage). The brand also sought to acquire content fit for re-use on Dior's own channels.

In order to achieve the desired results, Buttermilk set specific quantitative and qualitative requirements for its pool of social media influencers. These included high engagement levels (three per cent and above), proven past performance, utmost authenticity – no "suspicious accounts" amongst followers, a location in a key consumer territory like the UK, France, Dubai or Malaysia, combined with a relevant audience location, as well as an overall commitment to beauty-inspired and cosmetically-focused content.

Ultimately, 67 influencers were selected via a unique content landing page, which proved vital to collecting logistical information surrounding all possible participants. For example, the page had a digital shade finder to ensure each potential influencer could identify their foundation shade without the need for a physical visit to a make-up store. When it came to campaign execution, said influencers were required to make one post per day over 67 consecutive days. These were cross-promoted on Dior's official Instagram stories, with an influencer introduced per day along with their matching shade. A resounding success, this incredible campaign saw the 67 influencers achieve a combined audience reach of 2.66 million. Their posts had 1.85 million impressions and resulted in 591,000 engagements, with 72% of content repurposed on owned channels and used as shoppable assets.

PLANET EARTH'S FAVOURITE VODKA – ABSOLUT

To solidify its new standing as "Planet Earth's Favourite Vodka", premium vodka brand ABSOLUT partnered with leading global influencer agency, Collectively, to orchestrate a series of planet-and-people-centred influencer activations with the aim of driving buzz and awareness for ABSOLUT online. Another gold winner at the 2020 Influencer Marketing Awards (this time in the Best Food and Drink Campaign category), this campaign was established with the key focus of increasing impressions across online media platforms (namely Instagram and Twitter) and boosting overall social engagement.

Lasting for a total of eight months, the comprehensive campaign saw Collectively assemble an "activist army" made up of bold tastemakers with a passion for protecting the planet and its people through a number of long-term influencer partnerships. Individuals selected to participate ranged from eco-conscious sustainability advocates to LGBTQ+ influencers and allies. The campaign essentially came to life through experimental online and in-person events shared on such influencers' dedicated platforms, which saw collaborators encourage their followers to take part in numerous experiences showcasing ABSOLUT's new vision. From a four-day sustainability centred event at ABSOLUT's Swedish production facility to a photoshoot recreating the historic march at Stonewall with renowned artist and activist David LaChapelle – events were incredibly varied and spread out across cities in the United States, as well as around the world.

The results: A total of 95 activist influencers recruited by Collectively created 612 posts that helped generate 68.4 million total potential impressions, 7.714 million views, and 739,400 comments, likes and shares for a combined 8.6 million total engagements, making it a mighty success.

