

Q&A

Online stars match global celebrities in influence, but for how long?

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John Stamos #BeyondTheCarpet WhoSay ad

By FORREST CARDAMENIS

Thanks to a cultural fixation on celebrity, it seems that partnerships between brands and influencers will never go out of style.

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Rob Gregory of WhoSay and former president of Newsweek Daily Beast is one of the people responsible for facilitating those partnerships. WhoSay has well over 1,500 celebrity partnerships and has recently made a stride to enter the luxury front, beginning with this year's facilitation of a partnership between actress Rosario Dawson and automotive brand Lexus, and has more in the works in the industry.

"At WhoSay, we use data on their fan base, the level of engagement of their fans and how active they are on social," Rob Gregory, chief revenue officer of **WhoSay**. "We use a fan score and produce a match report, based on millions of data points which includes first-party data and user ID with the ability to target on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter alongside all those users' likes and interests."



Robert Gregory

In this Q&A, Mr. Gregory discusses current trends in celebrity marketing and cultural fixation on celebrity, and the distinction between those who fit a more traditional conception of celebrity, such as actors, musicians and athletes and the new generation of online stars.

Here is the dialogue:

What got you into this line of work?

After serving as the executive leader at media companies including Newsweek and the Daily Beast, I was asked to

launch WhoSay's advertising model in 2013 by looking closely at how we could tap into better content marketing on mobile platforms as a way to reach our clients' audiences in a new way.

I joined WhoSay because of five major trends that I thought were going to collectively change the business: Our obsession with celebrity in the United States was growing; for marketers, it's all about social feeds on mobile devices that's where consumers are now; a growing trend that pointed to interruptive advertising is becoming obsolete.

Relevant content marketing is in; pulling eyeballs to individual publishers' is getting less effective, so a distributed publishing model is key; brands are aware that content marketing must reach the right audiences, otherwise it's a huge waste of money.

Tell me a little about WhoSay.

WhoSay has been around for five years but we've done a very slow and careful build towards monetization, which only really started in the last two years.

What we've found, and I'm sure you've realized this as well, is that when it comes to luxury brands, they may not always be the first to embrace a new platform or a new technology, or digital display ads, or social media or whatever, but when they do it they tend to get it right. We're just now at that point.

What we do is match celebrities and influencers with brands and turn them loose to tell a story that's more organic and loose than just a celebrity reading a script. We started with consumer electronics, financial categories and stuff like that, and last year we did our first luxury campaign with Lexus.

How does the landscape for patching brands and celebrities look right now?

What we're seeing is this very interesting middle terrain opening up that is bigger and richer than just a paid tweet or a paid blog post or a one-off public appearance, but not as big as the traditional multi-year super A-lister endorsement contract such as Jennifer Lawrence and Dior.

There's something in the middle, which is the type of branded content marketing where the talent can really put a lot of themselves into it creatively and run with the brief and put it in their own voice.

Why does it work for each party?

The celebrities look at it as not purely mercenary and not selling out, because they want to work with products that they would use and do use and are authentic matches with their persona and their personality and their image and that.

When they do the type of content we do at WhoSay, it's a more connective tissue to their fanbase. It helps keep them in the conversation on Instagram or Facebook or Twitter and it helps keep them top of mind and keep them relevant and in a continuing dialogue with their fans.



Image from WhoSay-client Rosario Dawson's partnership with Lexus

The brand wins because they get the kind of content that isn't as susceptible to ad-blocking or tuning out or, with interruptive-style ads, you can't click it out fast enough; the celebrities win because they get to be creative, which is what they like to do.

The fans win if it is done right because they get content that, sure, is made possible by a brand and surely someone's trying to sell something, but they get another chance to see their favorite celebrity or favorite YouTuber and see his or her creative take on a luxury product. If you do it well it's kind of a win across the board.

As you mention, everyone knows that celebrities are paid to endorse. At the same time, we have this craving for

authenticity and this craving for celebrity, and there's a contradiction there. Why does it work?

We're willing to suspend disbelief in a way or look past it and that's a little bit of a contradiction. The way we look at it is, not only is our preoccupation with celebrity at an all-time high, it seems to be heading even more in that direction that's what we bet our company in.

When you look at millennials you have an entire generation that is sophisticated and grew up with branded content and sponsored this and that, so they're a pretty jaded bunch.

I think, to your point, they're willing to enter into a sort of unwritten agreement in this triangle between consumer, brand and celebrity as long as the content is good. If the content's going to be funny, emotional or useful and some of the campaigns WhoSay is doing is having a celebrity teach a class at college that's sponsored by a brand and if it's going to be moving, inspiring, hilarious or highly shareable and it's going to help a consumer be understood by her friends or her peers because she can share something and say, "Hey this is me," then it's all good. The value proposition is there and if it's selling a brand, "Sure, why not"?

So does that mean we are not concerned with authenticity as we say we are?

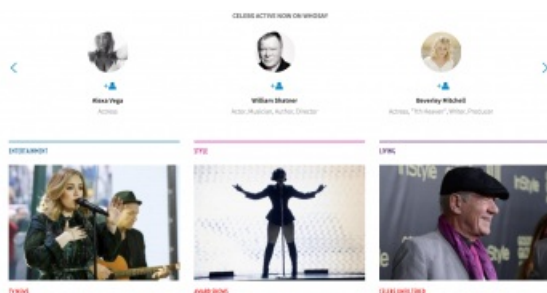
No, no. I think we are more concerned than ever with authenticity and the second it rings false and every once in awhile you'll still see a celebrity tweet about the performance and handling of my X is awesome,' that's an instant inauthentic moment.

If you look at the data now, videos now and places without sound and platforms like Snapchat where you have two or three seconds to live or die, you have to be authentic in three seconds.

Are we at the point yet where a YouTube/Snapchat/Instagram star has the same kind of pull as a movie star or a rock star?

Yes, I think we are; I think they have the same kind of pull but not greater pull. By that I mean the people you just mentioned, on YouTube, are partnering with William Morris Agency and CAA and all the big Hollywood agencies.

They are taking on all the signs and trappings of being a celebrity with a capital "C." There's no question that that is happening.



WhoSay homepage

I think there's a misconception about those folks being more famous or more exciting to millennials than actual movie stars are. If you ask millennials, and we did, if they would be more thrilled to have dinner with their favorite movie star or favorite YouTuber, they don't hesitate to say movie star.

WhoSay doesn't have a dog in that fight because we work with both, but we live in a culture where if you are on television or the big screen you're pretty famous. There's an aura around that still, even in the age of small screens and YouTube stars.

What is the long-term implication of that? Are the big-screen stars always going to be more famous, and are the small-screen stars just a flash in the pan?

If I knew that I wouldn't be working, that's a great question. Is this going to be a thing five or 10 or 15 or 20 years from now?

It's very hard to say, but what is a distinguishing factor and really important, I think, is that regardless of the platform, whether it's a six second video on Vine or an image on Instagram or a hilarious two-minute video on YouTube, or whether it's a feature film or a Netflix series or "Modern Family" or anything in between, there is a sort of binary aspect to the ability of a person to sustain a fan base over time.

Everything's super compressed now, you have nano-fame and people who are huge rock stars on Vine and they go to Hollywood and get an agent and nobody ever hears of them again because they don't have the ability to build an

audience and sustain it over time.

Then you have a lot of people we work at with WhoSay, such as the Alec Baldwin's and the Eva Longoria's and the Reese Witherspoon's of the world who, year after year and sometimes decade after decade, can sustain a fanbase.

You can either do that or you can't, regardless of the platform you're on. But 25 years from now, are we going to be leaving our homes to go watch a movie on the big screen? I don't know.

If we are those people will be larger than life. It may just be live sports, NFL players or whatever the big sport is 30 years from now, whoever we see writ larger than life, will be our biggest influencers.

Final Take

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