

COLUMNS

Nuances of influencer marketing: Building successful partnerships in luxury

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As influencers carry more weight in the marketing world, these social media stars are playing an increasingly major role in defining brands across the luxury fashion, beauty and fragrance categories.

For many companies, influencers are no longer just a supplement to the marketing and brand strategy they are the strategy. They have the power to reach vast numbers of consumers in an unobtrusive and genuine way, while simultaneously acting as brand ambassadors who strengthen relationships with customers.

But brands are facing the challenge of ensuring that influencers are promoting their message, vision and product in a way that builds the company's brand first and foremost rather than the influencer prioritizing his or her own brand.

In the constantly evolving influencer space, here is how luxury marketers across categories can create successful influencer partnerships and connect with consumers on a deeper level.

Start with a brand muse not an influencer

Oftentimes, brands begin their influencer strategy by brainstorming and researching the latest "It" girls, or combing through copious lists of Instagram stars to find the most promising option. But this method is largely ineffective from a brand-building standpoint.

Rather than starting with the influencer, luxury marketers should begin by sketching out a brand muse.

This muse is more than a source of inspiration. He or she is the personification of the brand, the intersection where a brand's values meet the consumer's aspirations and come to life.

Once a muse is defined, it becomes a natural filter for selecting everything from the right influencer, to brand partners and beyond and can be applied across the luxury landscape to fashion, watches, beauty and accessories.

Marketers can be confident that their brand is being expressed in the most relevant and authentic way, and cultivate successful influencer partnerships that embody their message.

Apply the brand muse lens

Once marketers have ideated and constructed their brand muse, they must then use this persona as a filter to determine which influencers will best align with their vision.

In today's marketing world, the same mega-influencers are attached to so many different brands, particularly in beauty and fitness.

Partnering with a major celebrity may draw attention and put a brand on the map a strategy that certainly has its place but it does very little to tangibly advance the brand's goals. This is where the need for a brand muse arises, defining a company's influencer strategy far beyond the latest "It" girl.

When marketers begin with the muse rather than the influencer, this approach begins to guide and illuminate brand goals, as well as the strategies needed to reach them.

Marketers must look for influencers that are uniquely fit for their brand and have not been over-leveraged in a way that dilutes their essence or what they personally represent.

Look beyond follower count

There is a perception permeating the fashion and beauty luxury space that the most valuable influencer is the one with the most followers. But this approach does not necessarily translate to the most meaningful brand-consumer connection.

In fact, an inauthentic partnership la Kim Kardashian and Airbnb can feel discordant, and go so far as to alienate consumers.

It is vitally important to determine the actual impact of audience size, measuring genuine conversation as opposed to hits, likes and clicks.

Do not underestimate the potential impact of micro-influencers, who often have the bandwidth to maintain a higher level of engagement with their followers, and who might have a more specific and brand-valuable follower base than those with a much larger fan base.

Such micro-influencers are particularly effective in the fashion and beauty space, where consumers seek one-on-one advice and feedback on the latest matte lipsticks or how to style their fall boots.

At the same time, reach plays an important role, and marketers must hone their strategies to balance both.

A muse enables brands to accommodate and activate multiple levels and types of influencers, while allowing the company to maintain control of its own narrative.

Revolve has used this strategy successfully, as it has built its brand around a muse and activated influencers through that lens. The Hamptons party with Kim Kardashian and a wide array of fashion bloggers and Instagram stars showed how effective a muse aligned with an influencer can be in generating earned media and increased engagement.

As influencer strategies become more nuanced, we are seeing marketers seek out both a face for their brand, as well as a network of additional social media stars who represent various facets of brand qualities.

WHEN TRYING to balance competing interests of multiple influencers who naturally seek to promote their personal brand with marketers' goals, aligning all of these individuals under a coherent vision for a brand muse becomes even more imperative to success.

To make influencers work for you rather than the other way around, it is essential to lead with strategy.

Influencer marketing has become complex and multifaceted. But if done correctly, it can have major payoffs for luxury brands in the fashion, beauty fragrance industries and beyond.

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