

COLUMNS

The next evolution of influencer marketing

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We have been reading a lot about influencer marketing in the news lately.

Many people think influencer marketing is the hottest new fad, but influencer marketing is not a new concept by any means. From celebrity endorsements to social advocacy campaigns, we have seen various forms of influencer marketing throughout advertising's history.

As it relates to social, we have seen a few distinct phases in the evolution of influencer marketing.

With each phase there has been praise and criticism from brands, consumers and influencers.

Working with some of the top brands and most talented influencers, we have had a front row seat to watch how the industry has learned from mistakes and worked to replicate successes.

Early beginnings

The first phase of social influencer marketing began around 2010. Social monitoring software showcased brands that were engaging on social and identified with whom they should be interacting.

This was the age of 101 different social media monitoring tools that brands could access to better understand their audience. No one tool was vastly different from the other. To brands, these tools embodied the true value of social media marketing. For the first time, brands could prioritize with whom they were engaging and how.

As social media was still in its infancy, these innovations were very impactful for brands and provided amazing surprise-and-delight opportunities for consumers with the spontaneous responses. This seemed to be the future of marketing for brands.

But the issue they faced was that these interactions were very anecdotal and not very programmatic. Brands were seeking ways to measure the results of these interactions while increasing the efficiency of these programs by making them more scalable.

During this time, brands were developing their social media marketing strategies and building their presence on new networks such as Instagram and Twitter.

There were many consumers who began making a name for themselves, as well. There were comedians such as @yoyoha and photographers including @denisebovee who built sizable audiences in the early days of these networks.

The brands' desires for more scalable programs and the community members who began building their own presences gave way to the next phase of social influencer marketing.

Making influencer marketing programmatic

Beginning in 2013, many different influencer agencies and software platforms emerged to solve for these issues. They each worked from one of two different avenues.

Avenue A was the "influencer agency" which provided a managed service offering where the agency recruited influencers to work for the brand. They often had rosters of influencers focused on specific industries or interest areas, specializing in some campaigns over others. Influencer agencies helped to alleviate the problem of the daunting manual work that went into building a successful program.

Avenue B came from the software platforms that often evolved from the same early social media monitoring platforms. These platforms promised the ultimate in scalability and efficiency. You could log in, see the influential people in a specific area, and contact them for your programs. The hype surrounding these platforms led many to believe that this would be the silver bullet for which brands were looking.

However, they presented their own issues. On the low-end of the spectrum, some tools proved to just be glorified lists of the same social media monitoring problems, while on the high-end, the expensive platforms often overwhelmed marketers with information on which they could not execute.

Today, both of these avenues face a common issue: the efficiencies that were built were focused on the wrong intentions and commoditized the ever-important relationship between influencers and brands. The emphasis was on the ease of recruiting influencers to drive sales and this led to the spammy posts with which influencer marketing unfortunately has come to be so negatively associated.

The human element that powered the surprise of brand interactions with consumers in the early days has been lost.

And while brands were so focused on the potential of using influencers for their marketing programs, influencers were busy building their own potential. Influencer marketing was getting legitimized by big brands sending influencers on spontaneous trips and inviting Internet personalities to the red carpet.

Though our current phase of influencer marketing has its detractors, brands and influencers alike are beginning to realize the full potential of their collaborations.

Future of influencer marketing

Now we are on the cusp of the next evolution of influencer marketing.

Savvy brands who have already begun to right this ship are seeing amazing results. By focusing on authentic influencers who can share the brand's story, they are getting their messages in front of new audiences in more meaningful ways.

The smart brands understand that while they have been building their own social presences, there are influencers who have been doing the same. These individuals have built audiences because of the amazing content that they are creating. So brands are seeking collaborations to target their messages to already engaged audiences.

These collaborations require balance between increasing the scale of their programs and maintaining these important human relationships. And the brands that are doing it well are working with the creators who understand the importance of authenticity in their sharing and know how to make a brand engagement successful.

The influencers are at a stage now where they are operating as their own brand with thousands often millions of followers who recognize their content and personalities. When these top creators are working with a brand, they understand the importance of staying true to this identity. It is in the brand's best interest to enable them to do this.

TRADITIONALLY, THE INFLUENCER is brought to the table once the campaign plan has been created. But in the future of influencer marketing, we foresee more brands getting influencers involved earlier in the planning process.

Creating content guidelines and program agendas with creative input from the influencers you are partnering with will facilitate your ideation and bring an added degree of authenticity to your program.

The future of successful influencer marketing will depend on a brand's ability to craft authentic programs in true partnership with an influencer, revisiting the human element that made it effective in the first place.

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