

MARKETING

## Employee advocacy offers scalable alternative to influencer marketing

June 12, 2018



*Sephora recently featured its employees in a campaign. Image credit: Sephora*

By SARAH JONES

While influencer marketing is a hot topic in social media today, a new report finds that celebrity personalities do not hold as much sway as individuals who are perceived as regular people.

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Sprout Social found that 61 percent of consumers would be apt to look into a product after a friend recommended it, compared to only 35 percent who would consider a purchase after hearing about it from an influencer. With consumers responding more to their peers, Sprout sees a big potential for the budget-friendly tactic of using a brand's own employees as influencers.

"In today's social atmosphere, transparency plays a large part in customer loyalty," said Rachael Samuels, Social Media Manager at [Sprout Social](#), Chicago. "Consumers want real, authentic posts from friends and family, not celebrity influencers.

"In fact, consumers are more likely to research a product or service recommended on social by a friend than if a product or service was recommended by an influencer or celebrity," she said. "For all brands, including luxury, the time has come to start leveraging employees and loyal customers to promote their messaging with authenticity.

"Our report shows that 70 percent of marketers use employees as influencers or advocates today, or want to in the future, signaling this is a trend that is gaining momentum."

Sprout Social's report is based on a survey of 2,000 marketers.

State of social

Only one in five marketers surveyed has a budget for influencer marketing. In contrast, 69 percent of respondents have used or plan to leverage employees as social advocates.

For instance, U.S. fashion brand Marc Jacobs introduced consumers to its employees with a video series that explored what they do after work ([see story](#)).

*#MJAAfterHours Tokyo: Shin*

Sephora similarly tapped into its own pool of real employees to act as brand ambassadors for its holiday campaign (see story).

When marketing on social media, brands need to consider that consumers are still primarily using these channels to connect with friends and family. Sprout compares this to brands being a dinner guest rather than a family member.

The report found that the types of content marketers are serving up differ from what consumers wish to see from brands. Marketers are most likely to publish posts that tell a story or inspire, while consumers desire promotional offers and product introductions.

Consumers also respond well to educational content, which is the type of content marketers are most apt to share.

Reflective of the growth in platforms such as Instagram, consumers crave visual-first content, with 58 percent preferring imagery and video.



*Consumers prefer visual content. Image credit: Cartier*

There is a higher threshold for earning consumer shares than engagements, with followers more apt to like or comment than spread content. The only category where engagement and shares have the same likelihood is inspirational content, which has a 44 percent likelihood of receiving actions.

Marketers' top challenge on social media is measuring ROI. Part of this problem stems from the fact that marketers' goals are tied to top of funnel awareness or engagement, while ROI measurements are often focused on sales.

Aside from changing the KPIs used for social campaigns, there is also an opportunity for more conversation surrounding ROI. Despite finding measurement challenging, six in 10 social marketers are not regularly discussing ROI with their bosses.

"To maximize the ROI from social media, the report found that marketers first and foremost need to take a hard look at their strategy and consider that the 'return' of social media is not necessarily direct attribution," Ms. Samuels said. "Our data shows social's true impact is in the awareness and consideration stages of the funnel, presenting brands with an opportunity to craft more personalized strategies that align with consumers' preferences.

"When asked what they want from brands on social, consumers said two of their top preferences are educational content and information on new products and services," she said. "By shifting away from the 'buy now' language and ushering consumers into an overall brand experience, marketers can engage their audiences in a more meaningful, relevant way that will deliver greater ROI in the end."

#### Social network

Facebook is a primary focus of social marketers, with 83 percent having purchased advertising on the platform.

However, while 94 percent of consumers use the social network, 25 percent say they are spending less time on it. In contrast, Facebook-owned Instagram has 36 percent saying they are spending more time on the photo platform.

Despite its troubles, Facebook was still far and away the most popular platform for digital advertising this past year, according to a report from Forrester Research.

The report found that Facebook and Alibaba together were jointly responsible for 48 percent of the year-over-year ad spend growth throughout the world. Facebook's overall share of global advertising also has grown significantly since 2015, making it an even more dominant presence for brands of all sizes (see story).

Luxury brands have seen success with Facebook efforts.

For instance, Italian fashion brand Bottega Veneta worked with Facebook for an experimental Luxury Hack, creating a completely digital and mobile campaign in just seven days with the help of specialists from the social network.

The Luxury Hack was a week-long event by Facebook to help luxury brands advertise on its platforms. According to Bottega Veneta, the campaign created with Facebook led to a 9.3 point lift in ad recall for the brand ([see story](#)).

"Consumers are still primarily using social media as a way to connect with their friends and family, but it doesn't mean brands aren't welcome," Ms. Samuels said. "Instead, it is an important reminder for brands to minimize disruption and maximize relevance.

"The most enlightened social marketing strategy integrates awareness and consideration stage content opening the door with entertainment and inspiration, then carrying audiences across the threshold with education, information about new product offerings and, if applicable, discounts and sales," she said. "When brands are able to preemptively give consumers what they are looking for, they will feel the brand is a more natural fit in their newsfeeds, often prompting increased engagement and investment in the brand."

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