



FLEISHMANHILLARD

# INFLUENCER RELATIONS

*What we have learned from a pandemic and what will drive the space in 2021.*



## **WHAT'S NOW?** *Our point of view.*

At FleishmanHillard, influencer marketing means identifying the right person with the right audience to create the right content on the right platform at the right time.

Companies can drive awareness, action and perception by creating experiences centered on mutual consumer passion points through owned, earned and sponsored storytelling created by influencers.

Here we discuss the FleishmanHillard approach to influencer marketing and what trends we are watching into 2021.



## **WHY INFLUENCERS?** *Trust and authenticity.*

Why are influencer marketing budgets projected to rise in 2021? Because in a world where consumers are more wary and less trusting of corporations, brands, public figures and news media, influencers maintain valuable trust.

People trust peers and “people like me” more than advertising or the brand talking about itself. Influencer relations harness this trust to benefit brands. But only when done the right way.

Our mission is to develop influencer programs that use a shared value exchange between brands and influencers to get more content engagement, ultimately meeting business and communications objectives.

**STOP  
EQUATING  
REACH *to*  
INFLUENCE**

**It's about the right creator for the right brand and the right opportunity. And it's not even about the influencer — it's about their audience.**

It's important to understand that reach does not necessarily equate to influence. Influence is defined by qualitative and quantitative factors going well beyond reach to resonance and relevance. We use tools to determine not just who the influencer is but who their audience is and how well it mirrors the brand's target audience, demographically, geographically, and by their interests and affinities. We ask: Does this group of followers align with who we're trying to target? Are their followers even verified, real people? Did the influencer purchase fakes to inflate their follower counts? Can we tell that their audience resonates with their content by looking at average engagement rates and view-through rates? These are just some of the vetting filters we use in casting a group of influencers.

## GO BEYOND SPONSORED POSTS.

*There are lots of ways to collaborate with influencers well beyond the #ad on Instagram.*

### **Organic, Earned, Experiential**

Depending on the client's objective, a sponsored campaign isn't always the right fit. We use social listening tools to identify influencers who organically mention being a brand fan and engage them to activate that fandom in certain ways. We can identify influencers who have an affinity to a certain category but might not already know about our clients in that category.

**And, influencers are not only peer consumers ...** they may be employees, executives, key opinion leaders, healthcare professionals, media personalities, talent or experts. All can be activated via similar influencer strategies.

## CONSIDER THE VALUE EXCHANGE.

*Even in earned influencer relations, there must be some value offered in exchange for the influencer's time, talent and promotion.*

### **"My rate is ..."**

Just because an influencer says their rate is \$X doesn't mean that is their value to the brand. Sponsored influencers must be negotiated based on how well they meet all vetting filters as well as the assignment, exclusivity, usage rights and more.

Earned opportunities may come with VIP access others can't get, free products, a cool custom experience or other non-cash value.

# ENGAGE INFLUENCERS AS CREATORS AND NOT JUST DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS.

*They are creatives who produce quality content we can amplify to new audiences via owned and paid channels.*

Influencers today are not just creating content for their followers, but for use by brands in their owned and paid channels as well. Brands need to consider ways to use influencer-created content to maximize that content's value to the brand.

We collaborate with influencers to create rich content and negotiate for brand usage rights of that content, creating resource efficiencies in creative asset development.

By whitelisting influencer content, we use paid social to target an influencer's post to new audiences who look like the influencer's current audience or the brand's fan base. This makes influencer-created content work even harder for our clients.



## **MEASURE MORE.**

*Forget about vanity metrics like impressions. Remember influence isn't defined by reach alone.*

### **CPM, CPE, CPC, ER, VTR, CTR**

Successful influencer marketing doesn't just mean garnering likes.

When the right framework is established, measurement can go beyond on-channel raw volumes and track the success of the program to business results. We can determine true ROI and demonstrate, beyond PR objectives, how influencers help drive business results.

Using rates, such as engagement rates, view-through rates and click-through rates, or cost-pers like cost-per-impression, cost-per-engagement and cost-per-click, level the playing field when evaluating success against benchmarks and comparing influencers' performance against each other.

## **BE AUDIENCE-FIRST, NOT CHANNEL-FIRST.**

Even with a spike in consumers' TikTok use this spring, Instagram maintains a massive lead as the most popular platform for influencer marketing. Short-form video dominates as consumers' favorite influencer-created content format, and both platforms lend themselves to that. But the key is choosing the right influencer to create the right content and post it in the right channel(s) based on how well their followers in those channels reflect the client's target audience. Rather than being channel-first, we must be audience-first.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

### *Trends driving 2021.*

We've observed a lot of new trends in 2020 that will continue to drive this space into 2021. Here are our observations and applications for influencer planning going into the new year.



# BLUR OF "NEWS" AND "CONTENT," "EXPERTS" AND "PEERS."

The way people consume news is completely integrated, not only from a perspective of platforms and outlets, but voices. What constitutes "news" today is actually a blend of journalism, information, opinion and content. With that, "news" comes not just from journalists but peers and other types of influencers.

For years we have been beating the drum of how we define "influence" and who truly has influence over specific target audiences. But now we also are asking the question, "How do we define 'expertise'?" "Expertise" now is not limited to thought leaders and KOLs, but to the layperson who has experienced the subject matter, shared their experience, added an opinion and leveraged their followers' trust. To their followers, it doesn't matter what their credentials are, where they got their information or how well they vetted it.

Brands have to keep listening to not only those they know to be influential in their category or sector, but also use discovery to identify those who may be armchair experts who are sharing content that their followers are interpreting as news.

## **SPREAD OF DISINFORMATION.**

Last year, Pew Research found that 68% of Americans get, at least occasionally, their news on social media. At the same time, 57% say they expect the news they see on social media to be largely inaccurate. It can be the train wreck we can't turn away from. Unfortunately, because they are so trusted, influencers can at times help fuel the spread of inaccuracies. Influencers will continue to fuel the gray area of what is news and what is content, leveraging their followers' trust along the way.

## **SPONSORED CONTENT DOES NOT HAVE A NEGATIVE EFFECT ON PERCEPTION.**

A Harvard Business Review study found that since 2017, the gap between favorable and non-favorable attitudes toward sponsored content has closed. The likelihood of viewing a brand positively following an influencer's recommendation was roughly the same whether or not a material relationship between the brand and the influencer had been disclosed. We will continue to see audiences engaging with and trusting sponsored content as much as organic — and brands less nervous that consumers will dismiss their sponsored content.

## **INFLUENCER POST TYPES ARE EVOLVING.**

COVID-19 lockdowns were highly disruptive to many industries this year, including the advertising business. But influencers, who create content at home, adjusted their posts to reflect their audiences' increased interest categories through the pandemic, such as fitness, food, hobbies or advice. This targeted focus has helped Instagram influencers garner huge gains in likes and comments.

Post-COVID-19 in the U.S. and U.K., followers say they want more how-to tutorials, humor content, short-form videos, reviews and advice. In APAC, post-pandemic influencer posts have emphasized product promotion. Cause marketing campaigns promoted by influencers also saw a spike there.

The pandemic has also accelerated the trend toward less scripted, filtered and staged content.

There is an expectation by followers that influencers will mix utilitarian and emotional content, maintaining authenticity throughout. In 2021, followers will continue to expect influencers to flex to meet their expectations of post types and tone of voice.



## **ALTERNATE REVENUE STREAMS ARE ON THE RISE.**

When quarantine first shut down the economy, many influencer sponsorship deals also suffered, and so did influencers' reliance on brand contracts. Many shifted their focus to alternative revenue streams and diversified income sources. More influencers are putting content behind paywalls like Patreon. Many brands have become interested in affiliate programs and links that give kickbacks to influencers. Bigger influencers have increased their merch sales. More diversified revenue streams mean influencers are less reliant on brand deals and can maintain tough negotiations.

## **BRANDS ARE LOOKING TO INFLUENCERS FOR CREATIVE RESOURCES.**

Since the pandemic, influencers have gotten creative with how they produce content. Advertisers discovered that influencers could be particularly helpful during a time in which large-scale commercial shoots were shut down. Influencer-created content is being repurposed across the integrated marketing mix and some influencers are being hired specifically as a content generation resource, while others are seeing more requests for usage rights in their contracts. It's no longer just about using influencers to reach those already following them.

In the new year, brands will continue to work with influencers as a content generation resource, maximizing efficiencies and executing more whitelisting and amplification of influencers' posts with paid media dollars.

## STREAMING IS HOT.

In the spring, we saw the quick rise of TikTok, and a few months later, Instagram Reels. Consumers want to be entertained and they want more short-form video content from influencers. Video is king with influencer content, but not just on TikTok or even YouTube. Influencers are streaming more in IG Live, IGTV and Stories across platforms.

In addition, in lieu of in-person events and HQ tours for influencers, virtual and streaming events featuring influencers have taken off. In 2021, brands will need to flex their creativity muscle to keep these formats fresh and engaging, collaborating with influencers to help avoid consumers' potential "online fatigue."

## MICRO-INFLUENCERS ARE POWERFUL.

They have smaller reach figures (think 10K-50K) but more than 40% higher engagement rates than their macro-level counterparts (500K-1M followers). They are less expensive — and they are very trusted.

Micro-influencers are considered to provide great value to brands with their ability to tap into very defined micro-communities. And, the comments on their sponsored or promotional posts tend to be more on-brand by percentage than that of macros. Brands prioritizing lower-funnel KPIs will engage more micro-influencers next year.

## FOLLOWERS ARE SEEKING OUT MORE DIVERSE INFLUENCERS.

In a time of much social injustice and increased focus on DE&I, diverse influencers have seen heightened demand and increased follower counts.

More than a third of consumers said they have followed a more diverse group of influencers than they did before this year's Black Lives Matter protests.

With increased demand, diverse influencers are commanding higher compensation. But before agreeing to a campaign, they will research the company's DE&I efforts and how well they have walked the talk of diversity to date, such as evaluating the diversity of talent in past advertising campaigns or other marketing communications. To make their influencer casting more diverse, brands will need to demonstrate an external commitment to diversity and inclusion, and not just checking a box.



## **THERE IS A NEW FOCUS ON LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD.**

This summer, in the U.S. and the U.K., influencer “unions” and associations were launched by and for influencers. The American Influencer Council in the U.S. and The Creator Union in the U.K. aim to standardize compensation and train influencers to become savvy negotiators.

At the same time, we saw the creation of @influencerpaygap on Instagram, which exists to expose the monetary offers given to influencers and give the community an opportunity to ask and advise each other on fairness.

It leaves us wondering: Will these grow for the influencer industry the way SAG/AFTRA did for Hollywood talent?

## **AS MORE PEOPLE TURN AWAY FROM BRICK-AND-MORTAR, INFLUENCER POSTS HELP DRIVE SOCIAL COMMERCE.**

While influencers can help drive consideration and purchase with swipe ups to e-commerce, Google and Walmart have announced plans to invest in shoppable video content shared by influencers on YouTube and TikTok next year. Mixing trust and convenience, social commerce from influencer posts will become an important part of consumer shopping in 2021.



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