

POV: Influencer Relations in the Time of COVID-19

There are some not-so-surprising and some very surprising impacts of COVID-19 on social influencer relations. On one end, influencers who rely on sponsorships for their livelihoods are anxious. In fact, influencers focused in the travel and tourism space have seen their assignments and contracts essentially come to a halt. But on the other end, while followers are cooped up inside, they are spending more time viewing and engaging with their favorite influencers' posts, so reach and engagement rates are increasing, and some content verticals are winning.

What do brands need to know about COVID-19's impact on influencer relations? And what actions can they be taking now? Here are eight steps to help you navigate these evolving waters.

1

Reconsider your call to action. Don't ask influencers to drive followers in-store, or to go in-store to get their favorite product to post about, or to document an in-store promotion. Ship them what they need to create content from home. Allow them to post brand-level content with an engagement objective. If link clicks remain the priority objective, be sure to have influencers surround the click request with contextual relevance. For example, an influencer linking to an athletic apparel brand's ecommerce site should create editorial content asking followers for their favorite at-home workouts or creative ways to organize their athletic apparel drawers. Use influencers to be helpful in an at-home way, not just to promote your point of sale.

2

Be patient with influencers for whom creating content at home may be suddenly more difficult. They may now have kids around who are typically at school when they're shooting content. They may not have access to their photographer or other members of their production team who are self-quarantining. They may have less time in the day to dedicate to content development because of new multi-tasking obligations. Also, think of potential creative restrictions. Influencers' content may have to be shot in the setting and have less visual diversity overall. Plan timelines accordingly and be nimble. Consider investing in more Instagram Stories as opposed to highly produced YouTube videos for now.

3

Cultivate influencer relationships during this time with a creative mailer or surprise-and-delight to your influencer contacts who are suddenly home-bound. Don't ask for a post in exchange, simply demonstrate you are listening and supporting them. Infuse a little fun and creativity that may be a welcome break.

4

Remember that influencers are not just millennial fashionistas on Instagram. Now may be the time to use social listening tools to identify true brand fans who have influence, particularly nano and micro influencers. Reach out to reward their affinity from an organic perspective. Or, it might be time to identify internal champions or key opinion leaders (KOLs) and activate them to influence externally. Influencer relations has never been exclusively about sponsored Instagram posts. Now may be a great time to identify organic and earned influencer opportunities.

5

Prepare for a third quarter boom in influencer relations as influencers are hungry to recoup income. Be ready for influencers to reach out to pitch their capabilities, audience size and partnership ideas. Remember to come back to your brand's qualitative and quantitative filters to determine who is the right fit from a reach, relevance and resonance perspective. Know your benchmarks in these areas and stick to them. Just because an influencer claims to be a brand fan and wants to work with you does not mean he/she is a good fit or has influence for your category.

6

Rely on the power of collaboration. An established influencer knows his/her audience best, and what resonates with them. Work with them, directed by a creative brief, and be open to how they suggest bringing your concept to life in a way that makes sense to their audience right now.

7

If you need to put existing influencer work on hold for now, clearly communicate expectations of whether the work will continue later, or if the agreement should be terminated. Compensate influencers for a pro rata of the time and talent they put into content creation to date, even if the final version was never posted. Influencers' value is not only in promotion, but also creation.

8

Certain types of content are performing well now, like educational/scientific, entertainment/humor, fitness, cooking and helpful/utilitarian resources for people not used to spending so much time at home. Do you have to stick to your previously prescribed content direction? Can you pivot to integrate your brand into any of these content themes? Doing so could open your brand to a new level of relevance for the times.

The impact of COVID-19 is fast-moving, and so is the rate at which brands and influencers need to appropriately react and flex. While we don't know how quickly we'll come back to "business as usual," we do know social media users aren't ignoring their favorite influencers even during a global pandemic. Brands that navigate these waters appropriately will see their influencer relations survive and thrive.

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