

A VIEW FROM JOSH KRICHEFSKI

Influenc-huh?

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How the ‘influencer’ has evolved and why they’re vital in connecting brands to an audience

Ten years ago, if we were creating a campaign for a client and looking for a brand ambassador to help connect to a target audience, suggestions in the room would likely have focussed in on big name actors, musicians, certain sports stars and other household names. The person chosen would essentially be used to influence audiences – appearing in ads or, in the early days of Twitter and YouTube, they may also have talked about a product on their social channels, all with the goal of positively influencing their audience’s views of that brand.

Flash forward to 2017 and this world has changed. The idea of using a high-profile figure to help create buzz around and interest in a brand is arguably more important than ever

before. But the identity of those people is now very different and the way they connect to their audiences is also much-changed.

The rise and rise of social media has enabled a new breed of influencer to emerge and it's this group who are increasingly vital in reaching the right audience – especially younger generations. From YouTube vloggers to podcast presenters, these creators are speaking directly to audiences, sometimes several times a day. And that audience is not to be sniffed at – PewDiePie, YouTube's most successful name, has over 53 million subscribers globally. To put this into perspective, this is more people than an entire day's viewers on any of the UK's primary TV channels. It's also more than the combined online subscriber count of the UK's main national newspapers.

Despite these new influencers rarely being famous before they start to build their social profile, the level of support they receive from their followers is incredible. Viewers opt to be alerted to new content when it goes live so they can stop everything and watch it as soon as it's uploaded. The sheer level of power is summed up in our Connected Kids study which showed that the primary reason young people use Instagram is to be influenced by the people on it; 42% say the reason they go onto the app is “to follow celebrities/people that inspire them” while a further 35% go on to “see the latest trends”.

That kind of interaction with that size of audience is clearly something brands need to be aware of and try to use to raise awareness amongst certain audiences.

But it can appear a daunting task. Tapping into social media to reach and connect to the right audience is a wonderful idea but it takes planning and expertise to do it right. Anyone can pay a YouTube star to talk-up a product, but if it's the wrong audience and the way it's delivered jars with that audience, it will be wasted investment. Some starting points are:

1. Immerse yourself – this seems obvious but I've lost count of the people I've spoken to who accept that there are new influencers that speak directly to their target audience, but they have never watched a video, listened to a podcast or read a blog from any of those people. This has to change. To any brand considering tapping into the social media creator community, you must immerse yourself in it. Watch, listen and read content and you will

soon realise a) why it connects so powerfully to today's digital generation and b) whether your brand fits in this world.

2. Choose the right platform – this leads me to my second pointer. Just because YouTube is a powerful format, it doesn't mean it's the right one. It is a visual platform so it lends itself to visual products or services – for example many drone and electric-powered skateboard brands gained major traction from partnerships with channels like CTFxC and Casey Neistat. But if your brand is more of a service-led proposition, then is YouTube right? Possibly not. In which case don't be forced into it – perhaps choose to sponsor a podcast and let their presenters tell the audience about your service. Selecting the right platform is an absolutely vital part of any campaign and it's especially true when you want your brand to be genuinely endorsed by someone who shares that with their audience.

3. Create interactive, engaging content – when you select the right platform, the next stage is often to come up with ways to seed your brand into their content. Social media audiences rarely respond well to overt 'selling' so the best approach is to work with the influencer to come up with a content idea that is engaging, fun and in fitting with their existing style. For example, if you are selling a new gin, perhaps partner with a gin-tasting podcaster and have them blind-taste. It means your brand reaches your desired audience but does so in a way the audience would actually want to see. While social media creators need to tell their audience if their content is sponsored, as long as the content is watchable, it will connect.

These are just a few initial steps that really do need to happen if brands are going to work successfully with this new generation of influencers. Clearly, there is huge potential here and the vast majority of brands can absolutely tap into it. But really fulfilling this does require robust research, clear planning and genuine understanding of social media and its content creators. Only then will any influence be realised.