Influencer Marketing: Building the right relationships to drive a brand

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"Since using Pears Soap, I have discarded all others," said the actress and socialite, Lily Langtry, famous for her ivory complexion in what is believed to be the first celebrity endorsement. That was 1881. Fast forward over 130 years, and using celebrities is still a go-to solution for pitching everything from social causes to soda pop to, even today, soap.

And while advertisements featuring celebrities are ubiquitous, many marketers are also turning to subtler approaches — both in terms of who does the endorsing, and how they do it. Enter influence marketing.

Where advertising has traditionally harnessed reach and frequency to make a point, the stock and trade of PR has always been relationships and the credibility that comes from third party endorsements. So while one solution for a soap brand might be to pay a famous actor to appear in a magazine ad, the PR solution might be to provide product samples and useful content to a dermatologist that has a guest column in the same magazine.

For decades, our colleagues at Environics Research have studied how consumers make purchase decisions. When asked to list the sources they most trust to give true and accurate information about a company and its services or products, Environics data tells us that 92 percent of Canadians mention word of mouth from family and friends and 75 percent mention articles or news reports. Just 40 percent mention advertising. This is not to suggest there isn’t a role for advertising, and when it augments the earned and owned content we are deploying for clients, we don’t hesitate to add paid media to the mix. But it does suggest that influencer programs definitely deserve a seat at the marketing table.

In public relations circles, influencer programs have traditionally meant leveraging third-party endorsements to generate buzz and earn media coverage. While this still remains an effective approach, the rise of social media has provided a new platform for "earned influence" — that is, experts, enthusiasts and advocates who endorse brands without the confines of traditional media, using their own platforms, from mentions in keynote speeches to 140 character tweets.

Now that anyone with a smart phone and an opinion can be a publisher, the number of potential brand ambassadors has become limitless. While this creates new opportunities for marketers to find people to spread the word about a brand, more than ever, a disciplined approach is needed when identifying the right influencers to do so.

At Environics, we have been conducting strategic influencer programs for over a decade using an approach that combines equal parts art and science. The art is in the ability to match the right brands with the right influencers -- from mom bloggers to fashion and food experts -- and then create opportunities that will benefit each and resonate with their networks.

The science is the ability to create and measure objectives and key performance indicators that can be tracked against an influencer program, and optimized along the way. Assessing and measuring the networks of potential influencers is also vital.

Building an effective influencer program does not happen overnight, but rather should be considered a long-term endeavor that evolves over time. And while every influencer relationship and program is unique, to be successful, marketers should follow these five steps for success:
Step 1: Set Program Objectives

Measuring the success of an influencer program is crucial, particularly if others in your organization might need convincing. To effectively measure your program, you’ll need to start by setting objectives up front. For example, are you trying to generate positive testimonials or trial for a new product? Drive people to a website? Build a network of fans or alliances? While it's fine to have a wish list, don’t expect an influencer campaign to do everything. A single, clearly defined objective will better focus your efforts and shape the program – from the influencers you approach, to how you engage them, to how you analyze results.

Step 2: Understand the Audience

Once you have set a clear campaign objective, you must take the time to really understand who the target audience is and what make them tick. Who influences them? Where do they seek information? What inspires them? What channels do they frequent? This step is crucial because it will inform the type of influencers you approach, and what they'll need to do to move the meter. For example, if your target audience doesn’t read blogs, then harnessing a syndicate of bloggers isn’t likely to have an impact on them. Conduct a digital landscape audit to understand real conversations people are having, their online behavior and what might influence their purchase decisions.

Step 3: Identify and Select the Influencers

An influencer program is only as good as the network you are able to tap into. There are many factors involved in building the right list that will optimize results and provide the ability to create brand advocates who can deliver your messages to their audiences in a credible, authentic manner.

It’s crucial to start with research. At Environics we leverage commercial and proprietary tools to identify and evaluate influencers. Over time we have built a robust database of influencers ranging from specialized bloggers and journalists to celebrities, lifestyle experts, foodies, health and fitness buffs. That said this is only a starting point. It’s important to conduct due diligence in this phase to learn about an influencer’s likes, dislikes, personality, manner and familiarity with your product or service. This is not a one size fits all approach and the more tailored an influencer program, the more likely you will build true brand ambassadors over time. Thorough due diligence also minimizes the risk of backlash. Just as an influencer can spread your positive brand messages, so too can they fuel a negative story if they are approached clumsily, putting you in damage control mode.

It’s equally important to understand a potential target’s scope of influence. Do they have a large online following? Are they influential within a specialized community? Do they have credibility with your target audience?

Finally, when building an influencer network, you must create the right balance between aspirational and earned influence. Celebrities can create excitement, but they may not drive as much action as an ‘everyday influencer’ who is more relatable -- such as a chef who makes healthy, inexpensive meals for her family.

Step 4: Build Relationships

Influencers, particularly bloggers, are a savvy group and must be approached with care. In addition to taking the steps above to ensure you are approaching the right influencer with the right opportunity and ask, exchanges must be transparent, authentic and built on trust over a period of time.
One of the biggest mistakes marketers make when embarking on an influencer program is to look at it as a short-term campaign. In fact, successful influencer programs are more than campaigns, they are relationships. A passionate, connected brand ambassador can deliver enormous benefits, but don’t expect that to happen overnight. Influencer relationships must be nurtured with ongoing communication; responsiveness and creativity.

Proactively seeking opportunities to create authentic exchanges with influencers even outside of campaign periods can be an excellent way to start and build a relationship. For example, an influencer tweeting about getting a puppy is a perfect opportunity for a pet food company to get in touch with tips, tricks and product samples.

### Step 5: Measure and Refine

As stated earlier, goals should be set up-front in order to evaluate a program’s success. Both quantitative and qualitative measures should be gathered and evaluated. Online analytics can provide accurate data points to measure reach (network impressions), engagement (page views and clickthroughs) and conversions (downloads, content entries, registrations, sales leads, etc.). Qualitative data in the form of influencer testimonials, feedback and content should be reviewed at regular intervals throughout the campaign to gain an understanding of what is resonating and driving action. This allows for ongoing program refinement and improvement.

In conclusion, influencer marketing can be a highly effective, credible and affordable vehicle for brand marketing. Identifying and forging relationships with influencers requires care and stewardship, but is a proposition that can create lasting benefits. Digital and social media have created new opportunities for influencers to significantly grow their networks, but also to measure and optimize the effectiveness of influencer marketing programs.

To find out more about building successful influencer marketing programs, contact:

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1 Environics Research Group, October 2011.