



RIDING THE WAVE OF INFLUENCE

INDUSTRY EXPERTS SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ABOUT THE VALUE OF INFLUENCE IN CREATING A NATURAL WAVE OF ATTRACTION, DISCUSSING KEY TOPICS RELATED TO IMPROVING IT. >>

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SHOULD MARKETERS FOCUS ON INFLUENCE INSTEAD OF PERSUASION?

AZ Influence is the deeper relationship that every marketer wants to forge with their consumers. It's the result of connecting shared beliefs, actions and experiences to build trust. By focusing on that, you can create lifetime value. Then, persuasion comes easily – if there's even a need for it at all. Consumers will engage, buy and sing your praises, feeling that it's just a natural extension of their relationship with your brand.

HOD Persuasive marketing can quickly take on an undercurrent of manipulation and shame, which may work in the short term but doesn't build trust or community. Influence

involves tapping into shared values, with the goal of connecting deeply with consumers. When people feel inspired, which is at the root of influence, they are much more likely to become loyal to your mission long term.

JM They are complementary marketing concepts. Persuasion is a broad-reaching communication technique and diverting focus away from it could weaken the marketing plan foundation. However, I would encourage marketers to invest more time in discovering how they can capitalize on the inherent force of influence. This process would reveal what provokes someone to

rethink their beliefs and ultimately causes them to listen, trust and follow a person, company or brand.

KE Rather than seeing it as a replacement [persuasion copywriting isn't going anywhere], we need to include influence as a non-negotiable part of any marketing strategy. By focusing on influence in the early stages of customer awareness, we speed up their journey and the persuasion piece becomes effortless and genuine. It's simply that final piece of confirmation your audience needs to know that you're the right solution for them.

WHY DO YOU THINK EARNED MEDIA IS BECOMING A MORE IMPORTANT MARKETING CONCEPT?

KE Our audience is so much more sophisticated these days. They can spot advertising from a mile away and aren't just sick of it, they're filtering it out by default. Earned means you can reach them while they're paying attention, meaning you have the chance to communicate so much more than the features of what you're selling. They get to see it in action, experience your brand values and visualize themselves using your product.

HOD People want transparency. They're desperate for it. Earned media helps cut through the noise that consumers are

growing tired of. As they become savvier, their distrust grows. Earned media comes with its own perceived seal of approval. People would rather hear about a product from another customer than read about it in a magazine ad. The endorsement feels more authentic.

AZ The biggest reason earned is becoming more important is because all types of media are essentially some form of paid media – and there's so much of it out there, everywhere, on every screen. Brands can [and do] creatively mask paid

to look organic, making it even harder for consumers to navigate and filter relevancy. On the brand side, truly earned media represents significant savings over paid.

JM Marketers are seeking ways to improve their ROI to stretch their shrinking and/or more scrutinized marketing budgets. Earned media drives product discovery and influences buying decisions. This is thought to be a more deeply rooted human path and as such is often construed as having a higher ROI versus traditional marketing approaches such as advertising.

WHAT IS GETTING LOST IN TRANSLATION WITH INFLUENCER MARKETING?

JM Influencer marketing is not finding someone with a following and getting them to say exactly what you want about the brand and in a certain way. Magic happens when the influencer stays true to their own beliefs, opinions and style of communication.

Authenticity garners trust. That said, giving influencers the majority of the control should not be at the peril of the brand's own voice.

HOD When executed correctly, influencer marketing fills the gap left by eroding trust in

conventional media channels. Its value comes from the intentional content influencers create to build trust with their audiences. When brands force influencers to adhere to rigid content parameters, it jeopardizes audience relationships. The key to their

marketing potential is lost. Collaborative, flexible partnerships create mindful transparency, which is what popularized influencer marketing in the first place.

KE You cannot simply buy influence in the form of ad space in an influencer's feed. Just like trust, influence can't be bought, which bothers most marketers because it

means it's harder to track. In fact, anyone who labels themselves as an influencer is unlikely to be the kind of person you want representing your brand as they often – though not always – make a living from selling other people's products.

AZ It comes down to a need for better understanding and better ways for

marketers to evaluate the effort. The currency of influence isn't dollars or eyeballs, it's time. That's the one thing consumers will always have available to spend on your brand. Changing the focus of value helps to eliminate the noise and confusion about whether reach is even real with influencer marketing and how conversion should be attributed.

WHAT IS THE MOST INFLUENTIAL THING BRANDS CAN DO COMING OUT OF THE PANDEMIC?

JM Increase, reinforce or re-qualify their brand credibility. This could mean adjusting the brand message through content co-authored with appropriate influencers. Or it could mean a change to the brand's media strategy to include more media vehicles and/or media brands that are inherently credible.

KE Prove that they're genuinely here to serve their audience and that they aren't just looking for an excuse to cash in on

an opportunity to sell something. In other words, take the high road and play the long game. Customers will remember.

AZ Be authentic when it matters. We're all just people going through the same thing, looking for help. Open up your brand, even give away your "secrets" as a means of creating deeper connections over sales. That doesn't weaken your position. It makes your brand empathetic to audiences that need it.

HOD Don't shy away from social and environmental responsibility. With everything else to consider, it can feel overwhelming, but the pandemic opened people's eyes to what they value most. Think seriously about how you want to be remembered. Dig deep into your brand's values and use them to measure every decision you make.

WHAT TOPIC DO WE NEED TO FOCUS ON MORE TO CREATE INFLUENCE?

JM Trust

Why it matters: People are seeking confidence and comfort in how they invest their time and money.

What's happening? Fake news, cultural divisiveness, economic concerns and health worries are exhausting consumer minds and bodies. This state of unrest has the potential to drastically change their purchasing behaviours and brand choices to reflect what is most important to them and their families, now and in the future.

The big picture: People are losing sight of who they can trust. Forge an influential and genuine brand-consumer connection. Create a strategic road map for how influence can be central to your brand's marketing plan.

HOD Shared values

Why it matters: We need to build communities with purpose.

What's happening? Brands are uniquely positioned to have lasting social and/or environmental impact, filling gaps left by conventional institutions. By building an experience that extends beyond selling products, they can help connect people and provide a greater sense of purpose to their community, giving people a direct line to the values they are craving.

The big picture: Canadian intimates brand Knix has perfectly demonstrated that a lingerie brand shouldn't aim to simply sell underwear. Instead, they're building a message of body positivity into every corner of their marketing strategy, creating purpose-driven experiences that engage and empower their customers.

KE Listening

Why it matters: I truly believe that marketers and companies making assumptions about their audience is where so much goes wrong: tone-deaf campaigns, wasted ad spend... the list goes on.

What's happening? Understanding our customers as people will allow for more effective strategies, higher-impact content and the ability to influence rather than persuade – or worse, manipulate. And that is the key to brand longevity.

The big picture: Rather than seeing customers as pieces of data, we need to lean in and listen to what's going on for them, where they're at and, most importantly, what they want.

AZ Social proof

Why it matters: Brands shouldn't try to tell consumers what to do. But they can influence behaviour by showing consumers what others did in their situation.

What's happening? Social proof is becoming one of the highest and most versatile forms of authenticity to persuade and communicate a message, using FOMO, reciprocity, community, trust, etc.

The big picture: Consumers who follow brands digitally are more loyal – 90 per cent of them also buy from those brands. So, if you're not connecting effectively and nurturing real relationships, then the opportunities you are missing go way beyond marketing metrics – they're affecting your bottom line.