THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN DIGITAL MARKETING ERA-AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract
Influencer marketing is the recent trend in the booming social media marketing process. It works in the form of collaborations. In this process, the business gets in touch with an influential person to promote their products, services or campaigns. Earlier, celebrity made endorsements was considered as a part of influencer marketing. In today’s digital world, social content creators with niche audiences can offer more value by engaging with dedicated group of followers on their social media page and are popularly called as social media influencers. This form of marketing comes with its own set of advantages & disadvantages. The objective of this paper is to understand the role of Social Media Influencers, the pros and cons and how effectively they can be utilized to promote the business.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Influencers, Consumer Behaviour, Social Media Marketing, Customer engagement, Target Audience, Influencer Marketing

Introduction
“The future is not about marketing to influencers – it’s about marketing with them. Treating influencers as an extension of your company – rather than a distribution channel – will result in a more impactful experience for influencers and consumers alike.” – Emily Garvey.

Social media influencer is someone who wields that influence through social media. The form of influence can vary and no two influencers can be the same. The right kind of influencer can reach your target audience, build trust, and drive engagement with them. They create original, engaging content to market the products or services. When social media
marketing is done efficiently, the revenue generated from the process is more than the cost spent in engaging the influencer for promotion.

**Role of influencers**

The most effective influencer marketing strategies build and foster strong relationships with current network, happy consumers and new influencers who are active in relevant verticals. Since influencer marketing is about building strong relationships, a strategy that values a mutually beneficial relationship is the key.

Mid-level influencers like bloggers have a smaller but more loyal audience and drive 16 times more engagement than paid media and mega influencers. Having influencers to discuss their brand experience is crucial. 88% of buyers consider online reviews “very influential” when making a purchase decision.

Millennia’s represent an enormous segment of the purchasing population yet are drastically different from other verticals when it comes to how to market to them. They usually vet purchases and a brand’s story more than other buyers. Consumers look for authenticity from the brands they interact with. When marketers equip influencers with an entire experience to share about a brand or product, the posts are more engaging.

The key point here is developing relationships with influencers before you need them. Relationship building takes time and once the connection is there, activating influencers becomes a lot more seamless and effective.

**Types of influencers**

Social media influencers can broadly be classified into the following categories based on their varying characteristics

1. **Celebrity Influencers**

Celebrities were, after all, the original influencer and are the most probable of them all. With all of their money and fame, people tend to look up to celebrities for the current trending styles. While they often have the most followers, celebrities are great for driving traffic and sales but are tough to connect with.

2. **Authority Influencers**

Authority influencers are those who gain the trust of their followers based on their extensive and in-depth experience with a topic. Their connectivity to the niche audience goes beyond their hobby. The benefit of working with these types of influencers is the distance their recommendation and opinion on something goes.
3. Social Media Sensations

These influencers are people who are already talking about the product or who likes products similar to the marketers offerings. Also it is essential to make sure that they are on a natural partnership.

4. Micro-Influencers

Micro-influencers are social media users who often specialize in a particular niche and use their feeds to share these interests. Benefits of working with micro-influencers include their relative low cost, their authenticity, their level of popularity, their creativity, the trust they have with their followers, and their extremely high engagement rates.

5. Bloggers

This type of social media influencers own their entire space where they have reigning control over what their followers are exposed to. This gives bloggers much more control and allows them a much higher level of focus from their audience.

Advantages of influencer marketing

Some of the major reasons why influencer marketing can go miles are as follows,

Reaching out to Relevant Target Audience

Collaborating with the right influencers can help the marketer reach relevant audiences. Influencers need to be carefully chosen with relevance to the industry. Influencers who endorse similar brands can be approached. This makes it easier for the organization to identify influencers who have an audience that they are trying to target.

It Helps Build Trust and Credibility

Trust takes time to develop and people trust the influencers they follow. So, if an influencer talks positively about a brand, then their followers are more likely to believe them. Therefore, one of the biggest pros of influencer marketing is that it helps build people’s trust in the brand and enhance brand’s credibility. According to a survey conducted in 2016, which polled 22,000 women, 45% of women will buy a product recommended by an influencer. This would have grown by leaps and bounds at present.

In spite of the social media platform chosen from the variety of platforms available, influencers can help add new potential customers to the marketer’s basket. Consumers today consider influencers as people they can trust, and they really value the opinions of the influencers they follow. Influencers often post questions and engage with their followers to
forge friend-like relationships. This makes it easier for them to influence the buying decisions of their followers and thereby promote the products/services effortlessly.

**It is Comparatively Less Expensive**

Micro-influencers are one of the cheapest forms of advertising. Their collaborations are economical when compared to collaborations with celebrity influencers. Influencers new to the industry readily agree to market for the freebies of the products and services from the marketer. Working with a number of relevant micro-influencers can be an effective way to promote a recently-launched brand or other niche-specific business.

**The Cycle of Sales Gets Reduced**

Influencers spend a lot of time and effort to build their audiences. This is the reason why most legit influencers have highly engaged audiences who can rely on them. When an influencer endorses the brand, their audience is more likely to trust their recommendation. Many of their followers may end up buying the product a lot quicker than another customer who learns about the product through other marketing channels.

**Marketers Can Save Time**

When working with an influencer, the marketer doesn’t have to worry about the pain of good engaging content creation for the target audience. An effective influencer knows the best ways to create content that can help them engage with their followers. They know the tricks of the trade to develop content that best appeal to their followers. And the content they create can make your brand look more trustworthy.

**Disadvantages of Influencers marketing**

**Working with the Wrong Influencers Can Do More Harm than Good**

It takes a lot of time and effort for brands to find the right influencer for their campaigns. When the collaboration doesn’t happen with the right influencers, it can cause great damage to the reputation of the brand. According to a survey, 61% of marketers find it difficult to identify the right influencers for their campaigns

**Influencer Marketing Mistakes Can Cost The Brand**

Influencer marketing is still a relatively new strategy and is growing at a rapid rate, so marketers are bound to make mistakes. There is no hard and fast rule to a successful influencer marketing strategy, so most of the time, brands learn from their past and current experiences. Some common flaws that influencers make, which can affect the brand, are Not disclosing that a post is sponsored, Posting content that does not resonate with their target
audience. Ignoring the endorsement guidelines set by FTC, inflating followings and engagements using bots.

**It is Difficult to Measure Results**

A lot of effort goes into finding the right influencers and launching the campaign. But all the efforts can be in vain if the performance of the campaign cannot be tracked and monitored progressively. Continuous analysis has to be made whether there is progress in achieving results. If not, there is no point continuing to work with them. Measuring results can also be a bit difficult when it comes to influencer marketing.

**High Risk Involved**

A survey showed that approximately two-thirds of companies will increase their influencer marketing budgets in 2020. But in no way will the increase in the marketing budget guarantee desired results. If an influencer lacks the ability to create impressive content, they might fail to resonate with the target consumers. In such cases, investment made in terms of money and time will be a waste.

**Impact on consumer behaviour**

In this digital commerce era, consumers are highly dependent on the social networking sites for ratings and reviews of any products or services they desire to purchase.

The following numbers show the impact of social media marketing influencing consumer behaviour

- The term “influencer marketing” increased by 325% in Google searches over 2017. Making this the fastest-growing online acquisition method of the year.

- Marketers are expected to invest an average budget of $25,000 to $50,000 into multifaceted influencer campaigns per year.

- Fifty percent of Gen Z (18- and 19-year-olds) and 42 percent of millennials (20- to 36-year-olds) think social media is the most relevant channel for ads, according to Adobe’s State of Digital Advertising 2018 report. Meanwhile, everyone over the age of 37 thinks TV ads are more relevant, but they still rank social media second.

- Instagram reports that one-third of the top-viewed Stories are made by business accounts, and one in five Stories receives a direct message from viewers.
The biggest platform for influencer marketing can be found on Instagram. It saw a whopping 12.9 million brand sponsored influencer posts. And that number is estimated to double in 2019, creating an estimated market size of nearly $1.7 billion.

This brings into light the role social media marketing and influencers play in influencing the consumer buying behaviour. There is a sharp shift in the number of consumers going on with their purchase intentions through social media marketing and influencers definitely have a part in contributing to the revenue generation.

Suggestions

Key Focus areas to be taken into account when engaging a social media influencer for promoting business are

- Expertise: The expertise of the influencer on running the campaign and the revenue he can generate has to be taken into account.
- Reach: The influencer should have his reach on the target audience for the particular product or service.
- Demographic: It would be an added advantage if the influencer falls into the same demographic group as the target audience as it builds reliability with them.
- Notoriety: The mass appeal and likeability of the social media influencer should be taken into account when engaging them for promotion.

Conclusion

The role of influencers in social media marketing is undeniably an attractive marketing strategy which can prove to be cost effective and profitable when used effectively. Although, the process of choosing and aligning with the social media influencer in terms of content creation and reaching out to the target audience can be challenging at times. Influencer marketing will definitely be the way going forward in the coming days for the niche advantages associated with it.

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