

Influencer Relations: The Digital Age of Media Relations

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Media Relations is a core pillar of the public relations industry. Working to help shape public perception of an enterprise and fostering trust with the intended audiences and partners lead to successful campaigns. Implementing media relations in PR requires strategy and tactics. Experts in the field state, “media relations is the systematic, planned, purposeful, and mutually beneficial relationship between a public relations practitioner and a mass media journalist” (Supa, 2008). Media relations have adapted to the changing technology and the emerging concept of earned media with influencers on social platforms. In the current social media-heavy environment, mass media goes beyond traditional news outlets. Securing news coverage that promotes the organization is the primary goal of media relations. In a definition by Cision, a PR and earned media software and service provider, media relations strategies are successful when impartial validation has been earned (Cision, 2024). Media relations has grown exponentially into an umbrella term involving traditional news and digital platforms. Influencers have become a strategic essential in product development and campaign success. Companies must match the content with the medium to develop trust with the consumer and achieve the communication goals in place. By overlooking the importance of influencer relations, companies will face setbacks in campaigns, product development, and brand marketing.

The evolution of media relations was apparent when the power shift of news consumption went from traditional to digital media outlets. Press releases were the standard practice of introducing offerings and new developments from a company. A transition to a two-way line of communication occurred when email and the internet became more advanced. Opening a conversation between a public relations practitioner and a journalist was the most effective way to reach outlets in exchange for hopes of media coverage. This is when building relationships became essential. As social media rose in popularity, companies could stimulate

personal connections to target audiences (IBH Media, 2024). With this, influencers have become a favorable source of earned and paid media for industry specialists.

The influencer relationships that are the most impactful involve the influencer and their audience having meaningful connections. As a public relations practitioner, working with an influencer whose audience does not trust them, is a waste of money. Using influencers as an effective communication strategy involves “co-creating content, driving narratives, and enriching the brand’s story with authentic, relatable, and compelling voices” (Forbes, 2024). Within the realm of media relations, working with influencers across different platforms can create visibility for a brand. However, the importance of working with individuals who represent the brand’s values and share aligned target audiences is a high priority. Traditional PR models push information toward large amounts of people to vitalize appeal. Influencers establish a personal approach and brands can review previous success rates from prior collaborations before making a brand deal (Forbes, 2024). Should a brand partner with an influencer, the audience supporting the influencer must be consistent with the brand.

Within influencer relationships there are two different kinds; Paid partnerships and gifted partnerships. In 2022, a report conducted by IZEA Research, a leader in influencer marketing insights, found that 62% of surveyed social media users trust influencers more than celebrities in brand marketing. Additionally, 46% of people have purchased promoted items from influencers (Globe Newswire, 2022). Two years later, 88% of surveyed people find influencers more trustworthy than celebrities and 77% of respondents prefer influencer-generated content to scripted marketing (IZEA, 2024). Paid partnerships are deals between the brand and the influencer that will be posted to specific social media platforms. Frequently, influencers are paid to incorporate the brand in a video and are free to create the concept but must touch on specific

brand details. Audiences can see if the influencer was paid to post in a few different ways. Most media platforms, like Instagram, offer a “Sponsored” label under the creator’s handle to indicate a paid partnership. Other indicators include using a caption that reads hashtags such as #Sponsored, #Ad, and #Brandpartner (Tobin, 2024). Paying influencers to post can often lead to audiences not trusting what they have to say, given there is a compensation incentive.

Gifted Partnerships with influencers are the key to positive media relations. The curated packages and products should showcase why people want to buy from the brand. By continuously sending certain influencers PR items, companies can build media relationships. Different companies have unique needs that require specific influencers to accomplish set goals. Influencer marketing managers need to evaluate which partnership aligns with the brand most. The range of influencers is as follows; nano-influencers: one thousand to 10,000 followers, micro-influencers: 10,000 to 50,000 followers, mid-tier influencers: 100,000 to 500,000 followers, macro-influencers: 500,000 to 1 million followers, and mega-influencers: over 1 million followers. It has been proven that brands that work with micro-influencers as opposed to mega-influencers see a higher success rate in sales and word-of-mouth press. Followers of smaller influencers are more inclined to have a growth mindset and perceive the influencer to be more trustworthy (Zi, Zhao, Lee, 2024). Returning to the definition of media relationships being equally beneficial, it is common for brands to reach out before adding an influencer to a PR list and vice versa.

The jump between following a micro-influencer and a mega-influencer can be significant as the respective people have different audiences and brands who want to work with them. To compare, @fionaleona_ is a TikTok micro-influencer with 44,800 followers. Leona posts content such as store hauls, navigating life as a 20-year-old girl, and PR gift unboxing videos. With this

following she receives PR gifts from smaller businesses who find her audience aligns with its own. A video made by Leona is titled, “PR gifts I would repurchase in real life.” In content such as this, Leona seems more trustworthy and authentic to her followers because she is specific about what free items are worth the money. On a larger scale with mega-influencers, bigger and more well-known brands send PR gifts because of the wider audience. Fashion influencer Kate Bartlett has grown exponentially since her start in 2020. Over four years she has reached 1.5 million followers, classifying her as a mega-influencer. Originally viral for her fashion student insights to her now famous “PR unboxing videos.” In recent years, Bartlett has received hundreds of thousands of views on these PR gift videos and many of the products shown are luxury fashion brands. Notable companies that send Bartlett gifted PR packages include Ralph Lauren and Louis Vuitton. The reason high-end brands choose mega-influencers and not micro is because influencers with larger followings can reach a wider range of consumers some of whom indicate a more likely probability of purchasing these luxury goods (Donawerth, 2024). This comparison is an indicator of how influencer marketing must follow the concept of matching the content to the medium. Brands place trust in the influencers they send gifted PR to. Influencer relations managers have the challenge of ensuring those receiving the gifts will benefit the brand with the support of their audiences.

Influencer relations management positions are necessary for employees, as selecting influencers can positively or negatively impact the brand. The team must make PR lists after conducting thorough research about who they are sending products to and have a plan should the influencer negatively review the product.

When pursuing a relationship with an influencer, it is important to understand that gifted PR does not ensure positive earned media. A mid-tier influencer, Olivia Marcus created a video

bashing cosmetic company M.A.C. for their wasteful PR gift packaging. Marcus, who has received M.A.C. items in the past, prides herself on being thoughtful about which PR items she accepts from brands, as she requests companies email her asking permission before sending gifts. She explains this by highlighting her awareness of the excessive waste associated with PR packages. After unboxing a mystery package she did not know was being sent, Marcus brought attention to the obscene amount of plastic and waste used. In the video, Marcus states, “I don’t care if this gets me taken off the PR list” (Marcus, 2024). While M.A.C Cosmetics is a large company, this negatively reflected the brand. The comment section was filled with disappointed viewers who thanked her for her transparency and pledged not to shop at M.A.C. Cosmetics (Denebeim, 2024). On the makeup brand’s website, the statement, “We’re continuing to evolve our efforts toward helping reduce our environmental impact” is advertised (M.A.C Cosmetics, 2024). With this, a video shaming the brand about its excessive waste is not ideal. Oliva Marcus has not posted a video showing an M.A.C. Cosmetics PR package since this review in February 2024. This negative publicity is the direct result of poor influencer outreach management. The team did not take the time to research if this PR item would be a good fit for the creator.

Warbey Parker, a prescription eyewear manufacturer and retailer in the U.S., executed an influencer marketing campaign that illustrated a powerhouse influencer relations managerial team. After vetting several TikTok and YouTube influencers, the team selected seven micro-influencers with decent followings to represent the brand in the campaign. While the influencers did receive compensation for their participation, highlighting the prior media relations between the two entities is important. The connection began with the brand and the influencers growing relationships for years. Warby Parker selected influencers who were supporters of the company and had audiences who were receptive to the messages they had

portrayed. The campaign, “Wearing Warby” intended to showcase the eyewear was a lifestyle brand. “Wearing Warby” reached over 800,000 people with a 3.4% audience engagement rate, demonstrating a successful return on investment for Warby Parker (Soona, 2024). When influencer marketing is done thoughtfully, the campaign’s success is more likely to increase.

The public relations industry is known for being fast-paced and ever-changing. Influencer relations is the newest field PR practitioners must navigate. Over the past few years, small businesses and luxury brands have utilized social media influencers to reach wider audiences, save money, and increase companies’ return on investment metrics. Strengthening the credibility of a brand is a top concern of public relations specialists. Influencers support this goal through the relationships they form with their audiences. As the data has proven, scripted marketing is no longer as effective as personally crafted influencer content (IZEA, 2024). Gifted PR runs the risk of generating unfavorable attention. However, due to the proven success of correctly executed influencer marketing, brands must move forward with the concept and develop an influencer relations team. An internal team is beneficial to ensure the brand partners with a medium that can secure positive engagement with the campaign or product.

Influencer relations under the media relations branch is the new requirement all public relations agencies and internal brand communications teams must be well versed in. The systematic and tactical approach to influencer relations can be developed from preexisting knowledge of media relations. While this field is still new to the public relations industry, there is no reason for companies to forgo influencer efforts. In doing so, companies are failing to capitalize on growth development and money-saving initiatives. Looking forward, there is no indication influencer marketing will go by the wayside. Media relations have been crucial in

connecting brands with traditional media. Influencer relations will amplify this notion to reach broader demographics.

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