



B. Business Impact

Changes in Consumer Behavior

Influencer marketing post Covid-19: Notes on being a personal brand

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Abstract

Influencer marketing, where brands collaborate with opinion leaders to engage with users, has been prominent in the marketplace. Such collaboration is under threat during this unprecedented crisis. This impact paper discusses the role and the content strategy of social media influencers during the pandemic and beyond. With a particular focus on the two critical success factors in the field, authenticity and relevance, we examine how influencers could evolve and remain consistent in building their personal brands. Based on the scope and the types of personal brands, whether with the emphasis on professional or personal-self, we make recommendations on the future communications strategy.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Personal brands, Crisis communication, Authenticity, Commercial relevance

The rise (and fall?) of influencer marketing

Brand communication through opinion leaders and influencers has become paramount in marketing strategy in recent years. A market report in 2019 showed that 86% of the surveyed marketers had dedicated a portion of their budget for influencer marketing. Based on the prediction pre-Covid19, the overall industry is set to grow to approximately \$7.9 billion in 2020¹. These influencers are often deployed due to the belief that their "ordinary customers" status make them perceived as more authentic and their brand-content more persuasive. As the influencer marketing practices are maturing over the years, there has been a shift from seeing them as influential individual consumers to personal brands. This transition highlights the need to consider commercial relevance in their roles in engaging with consumers. This places influencers in a unique position in the marketplace, the crossroad between being a (content) consumer and a (content) producer.

The main task of influencers in the commercial market is to provide content, whether branded or non-branded. However, during the pandemic, we can observe influencers struggling to keep communicating and engaging their audiences in the context of the crisis. Several factors may have contributed to their struggles. First, user behaviours have changed during the crisis. While more time is spent on social media, the usage of social media has pivoted mainly to look for information or connect with relatives and friends in platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, or Messenger. As a result, the share of eyeballs may have been reduced.

Also, most influencers are not considered to be reliable sources of information, especially during the ongoing pandemic. According to the Edelman group Brand Trust Report (2020), consumers' trust in influencers has decreased to 32% for a small influencer, 28% for a well-known influencer, and even less, 26% for celebrities, compared to 45% for a Brand's CEO. Understandably, the level of trust can fluctuate within the same influencer categories depending on the content types and the influencers' careers outside of the social media space. It is perhaps not surprising to see that many practicing doctors and fitness gurus have witnessed a significant increase in their following in the past two months. On the other hand, those who create aspirational, travel, and lifestyle content may find it challenging to make their content relevant to their audiences. There is no denying, however, consumers seem to look at brands to address the crisis mostly, instead of the influencers who may or may not be working with brands at the time.

The distinctive consumer responses and expectations toward brands and influencers emphasise the ambiguous status of influencers between being a famous internet user and a personal brand. The blurred boundaries have been heightened by the increasing participation of celebrities also in the social media space. Many have opened new accounts in the past two months, documenting their life during lockdowns. While for some of their intent to connect and be relevant is backfiring for the noticeable difference in their confinement conditions², the competition of providing entertainment has uncourtly become increasingly fierce—all of which further pressures, especially macro-influencers to maintain their market space.

¹ <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report-2020/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/arts/virus-celebrities.html>

Lastly, brands in these times of crisis are constraining their marketing budgets, especially in those industries where the pandemic has impacted more severely. One of the most affected marketing activities has been influencer marketing. Based on a recent survey, the two main challenges that influencers are facing in the late weeks are related to the decrease of collaborations with brands (27.3%) and the risk to look insensitive to their audiences (26.5%)³. The fundamental challenges seem to lie in their (in)capabilities of reiterating and expressing their relevance and authenticity during this unprecedented time. We examine the understanding of these two factors to date to provide a framework on how influencers and brands who wish to work with one can communicate more effectively in this kind of crisis context, what type of content or content strategy may resonate better and how to keep it relevant and authentic for audiences.

Staying Authentic and Relevant

Authenticity can be defined as something real, original, sincere and not fake (Gilmore & Pine, 2007), which seem to be qualities any individual could easily present in real life – in the sense that people just need to be themselves without any other considerations. To understand why it is challenging in the context of influencer marketing, we need first to recognise how influencers emerge and evolve. Influencers are usually consumers who go through a transformation process from being a person to a personal brand (Erz and Christensen, 2018). This process often coincides with and constitutes of the accumulation of their following. As they shift their personal identity to a brand persona, they evolve from being nano-influencers with 0 to 10k followers to celebrity influencers with more than 1 million followers (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). As they accumulate cultural capital and establish the power of influence, they often risk losing their authenticity. While a celebrity can still be authentic, those who are "true to oneself in their behaviours and interactions with consumers" (Ilicic et al., 2016, p.410), it is becoming harder to maintain and communicate as the fame increases.

This is because the construct of authenticity is not a fixed term. What is authentic now, for this community, may not be so tomorrow, or for a different group of audiences. Authenticity in social media has a few implicit values that need to be fulfilled. The "being true to oneself" implies that one's content strategy is consistent; any form of sudden change would not be welcomed. Much like one's identity has to be negotiated through their journey to become a personal brand (Erz and Christensen, 2018), their authenticity has to go through the same process. This may explain why some influencers' content during the pandemic has backfired. People are looking for a particular type of content or form of expression, and a sudden pivot may make them seem commercially strategic in their move, rather than being genuine.

The flip side of being consistent is to be unique, which is also a critical quality to be authentic online. Consistency has to be evaluated in relation to the community and other creators in similar domains. For example, based on the level of transparency and passion, prior research suggests there are four paths of authenticity used by social media influencers in the past to proactively manage their self-presentation (Audrezet et al., 2018). With our research, however, we affirm that being transparent with one's commercial intents is less critical than expressing passion for the subjects in establishing authenticity. By law and by public demand, influencers are regularly revealing their collaborations with brands. Internet users

³ <https://www.emarketer.com/content/covid-19-hinders-influencer-marketing-collaborations-causes-some-creators-to-shift-focus>

are acquainted with such marketing practices. This results in the lack of added value in being transparent while building one's authenticity. When everyone is posting in a similar style, it would naturally become less original or unique.

On top of this, generally speaking, there can be two types of personal brands. One is where the brand originated or built upon one's work, such as influencers who are known for their content creation, and themselves eventually became a brand. We can consider this as a *professional-self brand*. The other is where the entirety of a brand is built upon the person. Their life and themselves are the content and the brand. We can consider this as a *personal-self brand*. In terms of building authenticity, it will always be easier for the former than for the latter. The professional-self brands have, in fact, separated themselves from the personal brands. Once they add "personal" flair to their content, show a bit of vulnerability, and be themselves, they would be perceived as authentic. On the other hand, for a personal-self brand whose entire contents are already rather personal, there would be little room to be more authentic in a sense. Viewers tend to be building a stronger bond with the personal-self brands, but they are also likely to be more sensitive to the changes in the content strategy.

Collaborating with Brands

This belief in having a say in the content strategy of the influencers is a by-product of the transformation process of the influencers' emergence. Fans and followers of the emerged influencers are likely to have a sense of collective ownership in whom they contributed to making as a personal brand. This entitled attitude is distinct from the context of celebrities-turned-influencers whose creations can be separated and respected as their own and true expression. These celebrities use social media to add personal elements to the relationships with their followers (Johns and English, 2016) not to be dictated of what they should create. Moving forward, social media influencers, especially the ones relying on their personal-self brands, may find it harder to ignore the followers' opinions to fight against shrinking attention.

It is also going to be challenging to grow the follower base without occupying a particular subject-domain. In building its credibility and expertise, influencers depend on how well the content they create can resonate with their audiences. To stay relevant, one needs to provide value, be it hedonic or utilitarian. Influencers should not just consider the topic-relevance to the target audience, but also the context they are in. Consequently, content shareability is a critical factor for brands to consider using them as brand ambassadors, endorsers, or just to communicate the brand values.

Regarding content and shareability in social media, many have looked at the different components of content to drive sharing behaviour and virality. Most evidence indicates that emotional content is more frequently shared and impacts purchase and brand evaluation (as long as it is contextual to the brand) as compared to informational content (Akpınar and Berger, 2017). Distinct from the traditional belief that digital messages should include action words, Villaroel et al. (2019) found that generally, directive (action) messages induce less sharing than the assertive (informational) or the expressive (emotional) ones. While this can be served as general guidance, being emotional and expressive may not be authentic for everyone, in every genre, and all communities. It has to be evaluated on a relative scale to the influencers' own past content and benchmarked with others in a similar topic field. This is not to suggest that one should proactively imitate what is popular and in demand, but to find the baseline of communication and create unique content with such a reference.

More importantly, we content that, in the context of personal branding as the case of influencers, another category of messages needs to be included, which we called "inspirational." Inspirational content aims to reflect self-image based on the influencer self-representation in social media. This is especially important for personal-self brands, aiming at creating value through the "personal" elements. The individual characteristics of influencers are, after all, essential to determine their potential as opinion leaders. In this regard, their personal qualities and their likeability would eventually drive their followers' behaviours. The personal narratives, their arch of becoming who they are (as a personal brand), can turn into inspirational content without deviating from their personal-self in the brands.

A Guide for Personal Brand Communication

Sustaining personal brands overtime requires a strategic vision and careful planning. Notably, one needs to adjust to context while keeping the authenticity and being relevant to the audience and context. Here is what influencers can do in managing their personal brand communication in impactful ways in the days to come.

Carefully assess the current state in becoming a personal brand. As influencer marketing becoming a mature industry, it seems inevitable for influencers to eventually become a personal brand. While nano-influencers can enjoy the newcomers' authenticity, they need to strategically think of what they eventually wish to become, whether a professional-self brand or a personal-self brand. Authenticity would have different meanings, and it will not be a static aspect in conveying the personal brand to the (growing) audiences as it gets more established.

Benchmark the content strategy against the community without compromising uniqueness. During the process of emerging as a personal brand, influencers would have to negotiate their identities not only with their followers but also with others in the same subject-domain space. Since the perception of authenticity and relevance is always on a relative scale, continuous monitoring would help them adjust the content creation accordingly. The objective of the benchmarking is not to create the same content, but to produce unique value on the reference of what is the norm.

Adjust the content per personal brand types: being a professional-self brand or a personal-self brand. The two approaches call for a distinct communication strategy. Prior study on branding communication professes that the narratives should work with the brand image (Chang et al., 2019). Personal brands would benefit from the same approach. While personal-self brands would enjoy more first-person narratives, professional-self brands could benefit from limiting their personal stories and emphasise their competence through their professional content. It is paramount to note, however, the extent of emotional, informational, and inspirational components should be communicated proportionally relevant to the community norm.

Keep the relevance of the context in mind. It would seem that professional-self brands would be less prone to the fluctuation of the context. Someone who provides value with what they do would be expected to keep providing the same thing to a certain extent despite the changing environment. They are thus advised to only use personal elements as an occasional strategic move to enhance the relationships with their followers. Conversely,

personal-self brands are more likely to be expected to reflect on the changing of the living environment, as they are regularly communicating about their lives with the audience. The lives we live now has been drastically changed, to which the relevance of their content would require a constant adjustment.

To be an authentic and relevant personal brand—be you, but not the absolute you nor the whole you, only the relative you to the community you are in.

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