

Why people trust influencers more than brands – and what that means for the future of marketing

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Not long ago, the idea of getting paid to share your morning routine online would have sounded absurd. Yet today, influencers are big business: The global market is expected to surpass US\$32 billion by the end of 2025.

Rooted in celebrity culture but driven by digital platforms, the influencer economy represents a powerful force in both commerce and culture. I'm an expert on digital consumer research, and I see the rise of influencers as an important evolution in the relationship between companies, consumers and creators.

Historically, brands leaned on traditional celebrities like musicians, athletes and actors to endorse their products. However, by the late 2000s, social media platforms opened the door for everyday people to build audiences. Initially, influencers were viewed as a low-cost marketing tactic. Soon, however, they became a central part of marketing strategies.

In the 2010s, influencer marketing matured into a global industry. Agencies and digital marketplaces emerged to professionalize influencer-brand matchmaking, and regulators like the Federal Trade Commission started paying more attention to sponsored content.

The rise of video and short-form content like TikTok and Reels in the mid-2010s and 2020s added authenticity and emotional immediacy. These dynamics deepened influencer-follower relations in ways that brands couldn't easily replicate. Influencers are now recognized as not only content creators, but also as entrepreneurs and cultural producers.

Why people trust influencers

Social media influencers often foster what researchers call “parasocial relationships” – one-sided bonds where followers feel as if they personally know the influencer. While the concept has roots in traditional celebrity culture, influencers amplify it through consistent, seemingly authentic content.

This perceived intimacy helps explain why consumers often trust influencers more than brands. Though the parasocial relationship isn't mutual, it feels real. That emotional closeness cultivates trust, a scarce but powerful currency in today's economy.

The goal for many influencers may be financial independence, but the path begins with social and cultural capital, acquired through community connection, relatability and niche expertise. As an influencer's following grows, so does their perceived legitimacy. Brands, in turn, recognize and tap into that legitimacy.

Although risks exist, like algorithmic incentives and commercial partnerships that undercut authenticity, many influencers successfully navigate this tension to preserve their community's trust.

The many ways creators add value

Like any economy, the influencer economy revolves around value exchange. Followers spend their valuable resources – time and attention – in return for something meaningful. Researchers have identified several forms of value that influencers' content can take:

- **Connection**, or what researchers call “social value”: Influencers often build tight-knit communities around shared interests. Through live chats, comments and relatable storytelling, they offer a sense of belonging.
- **Fun**, or “hedonic value”: Many influencers provide enjoyment using entertainment, humor and a touch of allure in their content. Think cat videos, TikTok dances and random acts of kindness that deliver joy and distraction from the day-to-day.
- **Knowledge**, or “epistemic value”: Creators offer informational or educational content to feed consumer curiosity. This can be through tutorials, product reviews or deep dives into niche topics.
- **Usefulness**, or “utilitarian value”: From life hacks to product roundups, like “Amazon must-haves,” influencers provide utilitarian or practical value to help simplify consumer decisions and solve everyday problems.
- **Money**, or “financial value”: People love finding a bargain. Discounts, affiliate links and deal alerts offer direct economic benefit to followers. Some influencers even launch their own products or digital courses, delivering long-term value through entrepreneurial spinoffs.

These forms of value often overlap, reinforcing trust, and can pay off financially for influencers. In fact, consumers are significantly more likely to trust user-generated content like influencer posts over brand-generated advertising.

Lessons for brands

First, there's evidence that smaller is often stronger. Marketing researchers categorize influencers based on how many followers they have, and nano- and microinfluencers – defined as those with fewer than 10,000 and 100,000 followers, respectively – often generate stronger engagement than mega-influencers with more than 1 million. Influencers with smaller followings can interact with their communities more closely, making their endorsements feel more credible.

This has driven brands to focus on mid-tier and microinfluencers, where return on investment is often stronger. As a result, influencer agencies, brokers, platforms and trade associations have sprung up to facilitate these partnerships.

Second, brands should remember that influencers' role in the market comes with new challenges. As the field continues to become more professionalized, it's also become more complex. Like other entrepreneurs, influencers must keep up with shifting regulations – namely, FTC sponsorship guidelines – which can lead to hefty fines if violated. Many struggle to identify how to best file their taxes when they receive freebies they are expected to build content around. It can also be a challenge for influencers to keep up with continued algorithm tweaks from the multiple social media platforms where they publish.

Influencers manage more than content creation. Their role includes quickly responding to followers' comments and managing communities, as well as handling trolls, all of which is stressful. Personal brand management adds another layer of pressure. As influencers gain more brand partnerships, they run the risk of being seen as “selling out.” Because parasocial trust depends on being viewed as authentic, aligning with the wrong brand or being too promotional can damage the very connection that built an influencer's following. A single misstep can trigger public backlash.

While growing a following can bring brand recognition and financial independence, some influencers even fear that they will lose their own identity. Influencers can struggle with work-life balance, as this is not a nine-to-five job. It requires being “always on” and the constant blurred lines. Their lives become their livelihoods, with little separation between personal and professional identity.

In short, when engaging with influencers, strategic brands will recognize that they operate within an intense, high-pressure environment. Organizations such as the American Influencer Council offer support and advocacy, but industry-wide protections are lacking.

Influencers have earned a central place in consumer culture not just by selling products, but by offering emotional proximity, cultural relevance and value. They're not just marketers – they're creators, community leaders and entrepreneurs.

As the creator economy continues to grow, trust will remain its cornerstone. However, the next chapter will require thoughtful navigation of issues like regulation, platform ethics and creator well-being. Understanding influencers means recognizing both their creative work and the evolving market that now depends on them.

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