A New Strategy: Wooing the Influencers

**By Kate Conger**

The last time Don Lemon sat down to film a TV segment, in April, he perched on a stool in front of the glaring lights of CNN studio. When he starts filming again after a nearly yearlong hiatus, Mr. Lemon will have a different background – and he will be calling his own shots.

He will begin his next act, “The Don Lemon Show,” on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter. The former CNN anchor, who was fired by the network last year, is among several politicos, celebrities, and reporters whom X has wooed recently as part of a plunge into original video content.

In its former life as Twitter, the social media service never quite figured out how to attract influencers, and the money that comes with them. Linda Yaccarino, X’s chief executive, is now relying on her television industry ties to make the site a destination for video creators. If successful, the effort could bring advertisers and eyeballs back to the platform after its owner, Elon Musk, excoriated brands and told them not to spend their money with X.

Ms. Yaccarino spent three decades at Turner Entertainment and NBCUniversal before joining X last year. Her vision for influencers on the social media platform is less TikTok, more TV.

She has focused on signing up celebrities with dedicated audiences to make shows that run for up to three hours, a departure from X’s niche of 240-character text snippets, according to interviews with an X executive and representatives for the creators. She has at times relied on the business relationships that she forged during her previous career to lock down talent and negotiate bespoke deals.

Creators who sign up to make original content on X are paid an upfront fee, person familiar with the negotiations said. After that, they can earn a share of the revenue generated from ads on their videos and from subscription fees, two people familiar with the deals said. Mimicking YouTube’s typical rate, X have offered creators about a 45 percent share of ad revenue, those people said.

While Mr. Musk is not directly involved in the pitches to influencers, his anything goes approach to online speech has attracted some creators to X’s roster.

Mr. Lemon is joined by Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News host; Tulsi Gabbard, the former Democratic presidential candidate; Jim Rome, a sports radio host; and Paris Hilton, the reality star and D.J. Except for Mr. Carlson, whose show debuted on X in June, all he expected to have new shows on the platform in the coming months.

Some of them are there to test the waters – figuring out if they can earn the same kind of revenue that other creators find on YouTube and TikTok – or because their personal relationships with Ms. Yaccarino have convinced them to give X a go. Others are there after being booted from other platforms, hoping Mr. Musk’s approach to online speech will help them reconnect with their audiences. All of them actively post on X but weren’t previously paid by the platform to share content there.

“We are seeing a real interest from our clients in moving to nonlinear platforms,” said Oren Rosenbaum, a partner and heard of audio tat UTA, which represented Mr. Lemon in his deal with X. “Not only does a company like X give creators more independence than traditional platforms, but it’s an opportunity to connect directly with their fans and scale their businesses and brands in a way that hasn’t been possible in the past.”

Most of X’s new video makers don’t resemble other social media influencers, who are frequently young people who have skyrocketed out of obscurity. Instead, they are established media players, many of whom inhabit the political arena.

That’s part of the strategy, said Brett Weitz, X’s head of content, who previously worked with Ms. Yaccarino at Turner Entertainment and followed her to X in November. “The stuff we’re curating is more professionally edited and pieced together,” he said in an interview. “It’s broadcast quality content on X.”

Working with established personalities could help Ms. Yaccarino bring back advertisers that paused their spending on X in November after Mr. Musk endorsed an antisemitic post.

On Thursday, a day after she testified in a congressional hearing about child exploitation on social media, Ms. Yaccarino published an open letter to advertisers, promoting its child safety initiatives. “Partner with and come back to X – an indispensable platform that enables free speech around the world – and one that will always work to protect our most precious members of society,” she wrote.

Marketers won’t be asked to place their ads next to unknown creators, as they are on other platforms. Brands that wanted to advertise on Mr. Carlson’s show were pitched packages that cost $300000 for ads on four videos and up to $1.5d million for ad on 48 videos, according to internal documents obtained by the New York Times.

“The content that we’re bringing to the platform is incredibly advertiser-safe,” said Mr. Weitz.

Several of the creators, including Ms. Gabbard and Ms. Hilton, have visited X’s offices to discuss branding opportunities with the company’s sales executives. Ms. Hilton put her partnership with X on hold in November after Mr. Musk’s comments, and he responded by mocking an ad campaign she ran on the platform for cookware. “I don’t think Paris cooks a lot,” Mr. Musk said in a post.

But after conversations with Ms. Yaccarino, Ms. Hilton and her team agreed to return. “Paris and I are big believers in her vision and her passion,” said Bruce Gersh, the chief operating officer of Ms. Hilton’s media company, 11:11 Media.

Ms. Hilton plans to experiment with video and audio content on X this year, Mr. Gersh added. Since buying the company in 2022, Mr. Musk has relaxed many of its content moderation rules and allowed some previously banned accounts to return The promises of a censorship-free environment appeal to some creators who have gotten into trouble for their comments on TV networks or other social media platforms.

“Every day I come across countless, wide-ranging topics that will be the basis for the conversations I will be having on my new show, and I can’t wait to get started,” Mr. Lemon said in a statement. “By partnering with X, the work I do will have an enormous platform, free of any editorial constraints, to reach precisely the people that I think will be interested in hearing what’s on my mind.”

Mr. Lemon plans to share his show on other platforms, too, he added.

It’s not clear whether X’s move into longform video will resonate with users. While Mr. Carlson’s videos have been widely viewed on the site since he began posting them in June, he created his own subscription streaming service in December.

Like Twitter, the social media company struggles to find its influence niche humor. Before Mr. Musk took over, the company dabbled in different ways to attract creators. It provided funding for aspiring podcasters to create shows on its audio discussion feature, Spaces, and made an appeal to digital artists during the 2022 NFT boom.

“We are all in a war for people’s time,” Mr. Weitz said.

Some of the creators who X hopes to woo have been skeptical about potential earnings. Jimmy Donaldson, the YouTuber known as MrBeast , said in December the sharing of his videos on X was unlikely to earn enough to finance his productions. “My videos cost millions to make, and even if they got a billion views on X, it wouldn’t fund a fraction of it,” he said in a post.

But this month, Mr. Donaldson decided to experiment, sharing one his old YouTube videos on X. The post racked up 169 million views and earned him $263, 655. “It’s a bit of a façade,” he said in a post. “Advertisers saw the attention It was getting and bought ads on my video (I think) and thus my revenue per view is prob higher than what you’d experience.”

Because its paid partnerships with creators are new and relatively untested, X has not required its creators to sign exclusivity agreements that would prevent them from posting content on other social media platforms, and some intend to share their shows more widely.

“Our feeling was it was a great bet. Do we have guarantees or anything like that? No, we don’t,” said Peter Micelli, the chief executive of Ranger Media Partners, which represents Mr. Rom, the sports radio host, “They know they have to deliver upside for artists, or It won’t work.”