

Harnessing the Power of Influencers

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Public Relations is a versatile and adaptable field that proves to be beneficial to almost every business model. The true definition of public relations is often debated by professionals, but it is widely accepted and understood that “public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (“About Public Relations”, 2019). In more detail, public relations professionals are “the management activity which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the organization’s policies and procedures with the public interest, identifies constituencies or audiences to be reached by the organization’s communications, and establishes channels of communication with these groups of people” (Haynes, 2003).

Public Relations firms or agencies create valuable work for companies, but many companies even have their own communications or public relations departments. Regardless of the type or specialization of public relations “at its core, public relations is about influencing, engaging and building a relationship with key stakeholders across numerous platforms in order to shape and frame the public perception of an organization” (“About Public Relations”, 2019). This paper will explore how the public relations departments of major fashion brands have successfully used social media and harnessed the power of influencers to drive sales, build trust and create brand authenticity.

Social media, specifically Instagram, has grown to be an incredibly valuable tool for marketers and public relations professionals alike. Today, Instagram “ranks as the #1 most strategically important social media channel” for marketing (“Instagram Influencer Marketing Is Now a \$1.7 Billion Industry”, 2019). Often times a budget-friendly platform, it’s an easy way to gain exposure for products and services. Furthermore, Instagram also offers companies a lucrative opportunity to build authentic, mutual relationships with customers resulting in stronger

trust. Building a mutually beneficial relationship with key stakeholders has arguably become the most important role of public relations departments, as our society has become increasingly deceptive. If customers trust that a brand is authentic, they will be loyal; the key to success is building a legitimate and credible reputation and the strong customer relationship will naturally follow. The importance of this honest relationship is that it directly drives sales, which is the ultimate goal of every business. And, social media has caused sales to skyrocket in some cases.

Similar to every other industry, public relations professionals are always innovating and looking for ways to differentiate their companies' brands. Depending on the industry and the target audience, this innovation differs; however, for many fashion, beauty and lifestyle brands, it can be seen in the use of influencers. Before we can even begin to quantify the power of influencers, we must understand what, or who, influencers are.

Celebrities can be strategically used by brands for social media marketing and public relations, but influencers include more people than just the ultra-famous. "An influencer is a user on social media platforms such as Instagram... who has established credibility in a specific industry" and often has "the appearance of being [an] everyday [person] like you and me, though their identity is often curated in order to appear" that way (Trautz, 2019). Today, Instagram influencers "have the power to shape cultural trends and sell out products and are a major boon to brands looking to reach new audiences" ("Instagram Influencer Marketing Is Now a \$1.7 Billion Industry", 2019). Although their relatability is attractive to the average consumer, their actual influence depends on their expertise and trustworthiness.

Influencers have made momentous cultural impacts and the scale and financial impact of the influencer industry is just as impressive. A successful influencer makes their audience envious of their life, so the consumers want to be just like them. "As the proverb goes, imitation

is the sincerest form of flattery. In this case, the flattery has a dollar value” (Trautz, 2019). This flattery has allowed influencer marketing to thrive “well past its infancy” and is predicted “to grow to approximately \$10 billion in 2019” (Grieb, Newland, & Po, 2019).

This extremely high evaluation is most definitely warranted, as influencer campaigns have provided unprecedented results for some of the world’s largest companies. Take Nike’s “Dream Crazy” campaign featuring the ever-controversial Colin Kaepernick, for example. It started with a simple post from Kaepernick himself with a picture saying “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. #JustDoIt” on September 3rd 2018 (Beer, 2019). A full blown commercial and campaign followed shortly after. Nike timed the release with the start of the 2017/2018 NFL season and to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the brand’s famous tagline, Just Do It.

Nike was presented the ideal opportunity to reiterate its principle values which “center on mindsets such as never giving up, rising to the challenge, sacrificing for the greater good and serving a purpose” (Dudharejia, 2018). This particular campaign was successful because, as a communications program, it “[spoke] to corporate strategy and business objectives” (Dunbar, 2006). Nike’s decision to partner with Kaepernick and execute this campaign required “communications officials and corporate strategists [to] acknowledge the benefits” that could be derived “from each other and forge a partnership that [would] align both critical disciplines to lead organizational success” (Dunbar, 2006). As a whole, Nike’s team chose to take the risk and execute the campaign.

The “Dream Crazy” campaign walked a fine line of addressing our country’s most divisive issues— “race, patriotism, sports, and business” (Beer, 2019). While the age old saying “all PR is good PR” may not necessarily be true, this campaign definitely sparked unrivaled

positive and negative conversation about Nike, which the company took in stride. “People loved it. People hated it. People bought Nikes. People burned Nikes. People talked about it at home, at work, on the news. Everywhere” (Beer, 2019). Taking a very calculated risk, Nike knew this campaign would be controversial and was prepared to respond to those who the campaign upset, even issuing an iconic statement “instructing people on ‘how to burn [their] products properly’” (Boren, 2018). Whether people agree with the issues the campaign touches upon or not—its success is relatively undeniable. As a result of the “Dream Crazy” campaign Nike “claimed \$163 million in earned media, a \$6 billion brand value increase, and a 31% boost in sales” (Beer, 2019).

Furthermore, Colin Kaepernick’s individual social media presence unrelated to Nike laid the foundation for the success of the campaign. Often times, celebrity influencers “rely on their public persona, personality, and personal life to drive interest and engagement from fans” and even “use their fan bases to build online followings and then, in turn, use their platforms to better their careers” (“The 6 Most Popular Types of Instagram Influencers to Know”, 2019). As Kaepernick’s career shifted from NFL player to social activist, his social media following rallied behind him in support, which Nike was able to capitalize on. Because Nike was able to align itself with Kaepernick and many of its consumers’ views, it built new trust and stronger relationships with many key audiences.

Nike knew that it could no longer afford to remain neutral, needed to make a bold statement and could not be scared of offending people. With his background as “the former 49ers quarterback who has been a free agent for 18 months, began sitting and then kneeling in the summer of 2016 to raise awareness of police brutality and social injustice” Kaepernick was the perfect influencer to be the face of this campaign (Boren, 2018). “When brands and

influencers align, they possess the potential to not only amplify influence and engage target audiences, but also to co-create cultural relevance for the brands they partner with” (Grieb, Newland, & Po, 2019). That is exactly what Nike and Kaepernick achieved—a new cultural relevance. According to Nike’s founder Phil Knight, “you can’t try and go down the middle of the road. You have to take a stand on something, which is ultimately...why the Kaepernick ad worked” (Beer, 2019). Additionally, when choosing to take a stance, the influencer must be relatable, aligned and “have a real connection to the issue at hand”, which Kaepernick definitely does (Dudharejia, 2018). Nike’s choice to use Kaepernick as the face of the campaign was absolutely genius, strategic and perfectly timed.

Although using celebrity influencers can bring a lot of attention to brands, it is not always the most effective model for every business. Revolve, a Los-Angeles based e-commerce clothing brand, employs a completely different influencer model, which has proved to be equally as successful for the brand. The company has managed to ensure that there is a “constant stream of Instagram endorsements... from the industry's most famous influencers, who, in most photos are wearing – and tagging – garments stocked and immediately shoppable on Revolve's site and those of its stable of (not necessarily obvious) in-house brands, including Lovers + Friends, Tularosa, NBD, Raye, Privacy Please, L'Academie, Grlfrnd Denim, Majorelle, and h:ours” (“Revolve Has Built a Billion Dollar Brand Based on Influencer Marketing”, 2019). The importance of influencers to Revolve as a business and the scale of this model is immense, as influencers drive “up to 70 percent of current overall sales at revolve.com” while only taking up a “very reasonable 25% of the annual marketing budget” (“Revolve Has Built a Billion Dollar Brand Based on Influencer Marketing”, 2019) (“Revolve Influencer Marketing: How the Brand Got a \$1.2B Valuation”, 2019).

With an “enormous roster of 3,500 influencers” Revolve partners with mega-influencers and macro-influencers, as each group is valuable in its own way (“Revolve Influencer Marketing: How the Brand Got a \$1.2B Valuation”, 2019). While mega-influencers can flaunt millions of followers and are envied, they are not at a “celebrity” status, so they are respected as successful bloggers and experts of style. While macro-influencers still have hundreds of thousands of followers, they are more relatable and attainable; they appear to be an average girl-next-door, but they subtly boast an ultimate cool girl factor. The value of macro-influencers is that they often have higher engagement rates on their pages (“Revolve Has Built a Billion Dollar Brand Based on Influencer Marketing”, 2019). Revolve sponsors a range of these influencers content, making sure they post with the clothes; however, “the attraction is not just the clothing but also the aspirational lifestyle that caters to the Millennial audience” (“Revolve Has Built a Billion Dollar Brand Based on Influencer Marketing”, 2019).

Revolve’s influencer strategy goes beyond just normal Instagram posts and stories, and it truly sets the company apart from its competition. Further capitalizing on their influencer partnerships, Revolve has created a series of events such as #RevolveAroundTheWorld trips, #RevolveFestival and the #RevolveAwards to just name a few. By using existing influencer relationships, Revolve has managed to get even more content and exposure by giving them even more clothes, but more importantly, giving them exotic, beautiful events to wear those clothes to, creating a whole lifestyle to accompany the content they will post.

Revolve sponsors many influencer trips, where it pays for influencers to attend the trip, gives them a clothing stipend and even more luxurious perks. Each trip has a focus on a different clothing brand or a new product launch, which becomes instantly hot and desirable. Without fail, every #RevolveAroundTheWorld trip creates a social media frenzy, as the customers’ favorite

influencers flood their Instagram feeds with a lust-worthy lifestyle, Revolve clothing and Revolve products.

While the #RevolveAroundTheWorld trips happen many times throughout the year, #RevolveFestival and #RevolveAwards only happen once a year, so they are a much more concentrated effort. Revolve took advantage of Coachella, a popular music festival that takes place in California each year and gains notable social media exposure, and decided to host their own #RevolveFestival during it. Giving influencers an exclusive experience to add to Coachella made their content stand out in the over-saturated social media market during that time. The #RevolveAwards were another strategic move made by Revolve to involve their consumer and their roster of influencers. Revolve encourages the customers to vote on their favorite influencers in many different categories, and then announces the results with a huge award ceremony which each influencer attends while decked out in Revolve clothing, and of course, posts at. This ingenious and savvy use of influencers has skyrocketed sales and has earned the company and \$1.2 billion valuation (Biron, 2019).

The power influencers have is transformative to social media itself and to brands—and influencers themselves have noted this. Many influencers, such as Arielle Charnas and Chiara Ferragni, are deciding to take control of their social media power and use it to monopolize their own profits. Another industry leader who has taken this giant leap of faith is influencer Danielle Bernstein, known on Instagram as WeWoreWhat. While a student at FIT, Bernstein launched her blog, WeWoreWhat, which sparked some early successes, so she subsequently dropped out of school to pursue blogging full-time. Fast forward a few years, and Bernstein's success is quite impressive. Bernstein's personal Instagram has been sponsored by brands such as FIJI water, Revolve, Free People, Don Julio Tequila, Intimissimi, Pretty Little Thing and many more. In

2017, she was even named on the Forbes 30 Under 30 list, which is no small feat (Danielle Bernstein, 2019).

Now boasting over 2.2 million Instagram followers, Bernstein knew she was onto something. Eager to break onto the scene, Bernstein launched her first brand, Archive Shoes. Unfortunately, the brand was on the pricier side and did not last very long. But, as we all do, Bernstein learned from her mistakes. To test the market, Bernstein began her next solo ventures by simply partnering with brands.

For example, she was brought in to design a collection with Joes Jeans, where she gets to add her input into the design process and be the face of the launch. Strategically getting her name into the collaboration, #joesxweworewhat was used on every social media post posted by her and the brand. Her followers loved it, as they became loyal customers, giving the launch such success that Joes Jeans has brought Bernstein on for another collection.

Bernstein also partnered with the swimwear brand Onia to design capsule swim collections. Once again using a similar hashtag format, Bernstein and Onia used #oniaweworewhat to build excitement prior to the launch and connect all social media posts. Bernstein's followers were anxious to purchase and the first collection sold-out, obviously making it a victory for both parties. The partnership flourished and subsequently grew into a series of swim collections. In the "latest collaboration with Onia swimwear" the launch "sold nearly \$2 million of product in 12 hours" (Nord, 2019). Bernstein saw the increasing profitability of each collaboration with Onia, and has now decided to branch out and create her own swimwear company, WeWoreWhat Swim.

Her followers trust her opinion and recommendation on other brands, so of course they trust products she creates and promotes herself. WeWoreWhat Swim is not Bernstein's only solo

business venture, as she also designs overalls under her brand WeWoreWhat overalls. “Her overalls made \$70,000 within 3 hours of launching”, once again proving that pre-posting before the launch excited her followers enough to become customers (“How Much Money Danielle Bernstein Makes on Instagram”, 2019). Each of these companies is housed under the Instagram account shopworewhat, which serves as a hub for all of Bernstein’s products. As to be expected, Bernstein promotes each business and the overarching account on her personal Instagram, which gives immense exposure to the companies. It also allows customers an opportunity to see how she styles her pieces, so they can imagine themselves in her collections.

Bernstein has even begun branching out of her business comfort zone. In October 2019, she ventured into the tech industry, launching her own app called Moe Assist. While Bernstein did self-fund, she also “raised \$1.2 million in seed funding from private investors” in order to create Moe (Leskin, 2019). After years of industry experience, Bernstein recognized that micro-influencers, many of whom cannot afford a whole support team, still need help running their businesses. Moe aims to take over the role of an assistant, so it’s an “online tool for influencers to manage multiple campaigns collaborate on projects, and generate invoices to get paid” (Leskin, 2019). Bernstein teased the new business venture on her social media for months, sparking interesting in the new app. Her audience, many being micro-influencers who aspire to reach her high levels of success in the influencer industry, were all curious. Her following is truly interested in her every move, including the upcoming release of her first book. Once again, posting occasional teasers on her Instagram feed and Instagram stories, Bernstein is building the anticipation for its release, even though she hasn’t announced the exact date yet.

Bernstein’s success stems from her ability to create relatable, strong and trusting relationships with her followers—all 2.2 million of them. Without this relationship, her

following would not be converted into customers for brands who sponsor her or for her own brands. By diversifying her business and expanding expertise she also grows her social media following base as she becomes valuable to more consumers, so it is truly a win-win situation for her. Bernstein is a prime example of an influencer adding value to brands, but also creating her own wealth as a result of capitalizing on her following. I believe this trend of influencers creating their own businesses will continue and expand in ways which we cannot currently predict.

Social media and the influencer industry are exponentially growing, hand-in-hand. As Instagram creates new features such as stories, IGTV and shoppable links, it also creates new opportunities for influencers to interact with their followers. Increased interaction leads to more engaged followers and stronger relationships, which eventually transforms into sales for brands. The trusted relationship influencers provide needs to be valued separately from the sales their posts can drive, as they can build brand authenticity for the companies they partner with. Ranging from a focusing a campaign around one celebrity influencer, to diversifying a whole business model around influencers, inviting influencers themselves to partner with the brand, and influencers eventually creating their own brands, the opportunities for social and economic growth are boundless. Public Relations professionals working in the fashion, beauty and lifestyle are only scratching the surface of the opportunities partnerships with influencers can provide for their respective brands; however, they have had an impressive start.

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