



THE ART OF INFLUENCER BARTERING

Brittany Hennessy

In the age of social media, building your personal brand is more important than ever.

It may seem like everyone has a blog, or a social channel they want you to follow, and that's because it's true. It has never been easier to turn your expertise into a revenue stream and becoming an influencer will help you do just that.

Let's start with the most important questions: What exactly are influencers and why are they important? In general, an influencer is someone who has influence. I know, I know, it isn't very helpful to define a word by using the same word, but sometimes things really are that simple. Word-of-mouth marketing is nothing new and it's probably the driving force behind most of your consumer habits, whether that's buying a product, binge-watching a show, or downloading an app.

But in today's digital world, the word "influencer" is most commonly ascribed to someone who has clout through her digital channels, or as some like to call it, "social currency." Whether she has a lot of followers or really high engagement, when she speaks, her audience listens, they act, and—most importantly to brands—they buy.



In the last few years, influencer marketing has really taken off, and the term “influencer” has come to mean everyone and their literal mom who has a blog, vlog, or Instagram profile. It’s been used to describe everyone and everything so often that “influencer” is practically a dirty word. That breaks my heart because influencer marketing isn’t bad, it’s just misunderstood. Tragically misunderstood.

The New York Times published an article discussing influencers and spent roughly 1,000 words talking about Kendall Jenner, Selena Gomez, and Gigi Hadid, all people who are technically “influencers” because they have millions of followers. But really, they are A-list celebrities, which is worlds away from how we view a content creator with the same number of followers. One reason for the different perception is how they became influential. A content creator had to make videos, take photos, and create posts that make people want to trust her and see more. She has to use various marketing tactics to increase her audience size and keep her audience engaged. She must also adapt her content for each platform, because what works on YouTube will not work on Instagram. Traditional celebs become famous through their offline activities, and that influence follows them online and to every platform without them having to do much more than issue a press release with the name of their handle.

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Not to take anything away from celebrities whose talent and business acumen have made them famous, but it pains me every time someone calls a celebrity an “influencer.” Quite honestly, it shows a complete disregard for the very thing that makes a content creator an influencer. Authenticity is the backbone of the content these women create, and their audiences look to them for expert advice. Celebs are paid to promote alcohol companies even though they don’t drink, or cars even though they don’t know how to drive. A good influencer would never promote something she wouldn’t organically share or use offline even if she’s being paid by a brand. I’ve seen creators turn down \$25,000 because something wasn’t “on brand” for them. If that’s not putting your audience above yourself, I don’t know what is.

There is a difference between content creators (Youtube Vloggers, Instagram Stars, and Bloggers) and lifecasters (people who don’t necessarily “create content” but share their lives as they unfold. Both can be equally valuable to audiences as long as the influencer is providing them with a service. For experts and people with special talents like cooking or dancing, having a high follower count amplifies all the work you are doing in real life.

You can (and should) spend hours each day working on your skill and booking gigs, but you’ll probably keep being asked about your Instagram following. This is because businesses are always looking for easier, cheaper, and faster ways to market their products and services. A comedian with 100,000 followers can promote her upcoming show and increase the odds that people will buy tickets to come see her. This reduces the amount of money the comedy club has to spend on promoting the show and makes them more likely to choose her over another comedian—even if they believe the other comedian is funnier. The same applies to an actress who can get the word out about her play or movie quickly and to an audience that actually cares about her work. A model has a similar situation: A casting director would love to book a model who would then post the photos from her shoot on Instagram. More people will see the clothing or beauty product and the client gets an additional ad placement for free.

Plenty of people are upset that follower count seems to be more important than talent, but it's really about firing on all cylinders. In today's version of show business, the business part is happening online. You may not love the idea that your follower count may be seen as more important than your actual skills, but you need to adapt because those who don't adapt won't make it very far. Working on your social presence shouldn't make you feel like you've sold out; it should make you feel like you're telling your own story online and building a community of people who want to support you. And if you can make some money partnering with brands you love, even better.

The same is true for entrepreneurs. Once you've established your presence online, you can use your platform to showcase new products and services, show your followers the life behind their new favorite brand, and of course, acquire new customers. It's also helpful when reaching out to influencers for collaborations. They want to know who they are partnering with and make sure the brand's aesthetic is in line with theirs. The first thing people do when they see an ad for your company is to check out the profile, so maintaining that social channel should be a big part of your marketing plan.

As a founder of a business, you can become an influencer in your own right, and knowing the world of influencer marketing can do double duty for you. Not only will you learn how to manage and monetize your personal profile, but you'll understand the flip side when you decide it's time to activate influencers as a marketing strategy.

When building your personal brand, you should focus on three things: your Google search results, your social media channels, and your blog/website.

Looking for brand partnerships is no different than looking for a job. People will google you before deciding to work with you and they need to be pleased with what they find. Head on over to Google.com and type in your first and last name. Now take a look at your search results for

general, images, videos, and news. All the content on the first page should either be created by you, or provided by you.

If it doesn't look so hot, don't panic. Head on over to [google.com/alert](https://www.google.com/alerts) and set up an alert with your name in quotations (e.g., "Brittany Hennessy"). Every time new content with your name is indexed by Google, you'll receive an email to let you know you're on the right track. Every three months, do a Google search and keep tabs on the progress you're making. Remember, if you're not telling your own story, someone else will tell it for you.

When looking at the world of social media, you might be overwhelmed when you realize just how many platforms there are. But don't worry, you don't need to update all of them. While I would recommend securing your preferred username on every platform so someone can't

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steal it, you should only be active on platforms you have plans on updating. Nothing is worse than finding a great influencer on a platform only to find out she hasn't posted anything new in three months.

That said, everyone should have an account on the big four: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. You'll want an Instagram account because it's where the majority of influencer marketing campaigns take place. YouTube is a big market for fashion hauls and beauty tutorials, but it is also a great way to show advertisers your video presence. Instagram is slowly closing in on YouTube's video dominance, but you can't go wrong with something that is connected to Google. You may think you don't need Facebook or Twitter, but you would be wrong. The content you make is usually shared by brands on Facebook and Twitter, and if they can't tag you in it, you just lost a huge opportunity to pick up new followers.

The biggest reason to keep an updated Facebook page is because at some point, you're going to want to get it verified. The little blue check may seem like no big deal, but if a brand you're working with also has one, Facebook will require that any influencer they work with also be verified. This is why you don't see as many influencer campaigns on Facebook as you do on Instagram, but that is changing and you want to be ready. If you're an influencer, especially in food, home decor, and DIY, Pinterest can also be a great way to drive traffic back to your site. I've found that most clients don't ask for pins on Pinterest, and won't pay a lot for them unless you have millions of followers, but it's a good platform to join if you think you will dedicate the time to make it a success.

While social media is very important, you should also create a website/blog because you want to establish your home base on something you control. Any of these social media platforms can delete your profile at any time without warning, or prohibit you from promoting your other channels, but if audience members know your blog URL, they'll always know where to find you. Blogging has come a long way from its early days of anonymous diary entries, and because it

was the first medium to produce influencers, advertisers have had more time to become comfortable spending money on sponsored posts. They also love that they can easily provide feedback/edits on the content, unlike a YouTube video, and can give the influencer tracking links to see if anyone has clicked on the content or made a purchase.

Since a blog is pretty easy to set up and maintain it's great for aspiring influencers who are testing the waters. Unlike a YouTube channel, you don't need video equipment or editing skills, and unlike Instagram you don't necessarily need to shoot your own photos. I have seen many beautiful and highly clicked on blog posts that are made with some text, a brand-provided video, and photos found on the Internet.

Given how easy it is to get started it always surprises me how many people don't have a blog because so many advertisers want influencers to create blog posts. Think about it: When you

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google a product or service, what comes up? Reviews on people's blogs. Sure, you may also see a sponsored YouTube video or a sponsored Instagram post, but advertisers can track how many people came to their site because of a specific blog post, and advertisers love things they can track.


Once you feel like your Google search results, social media channels, and blog/website are in a good place, you are ready to start seeking partnerships with brands. Sponsored posts aren't your only option, although they are the most popular. There are plenty of small brands that would love to collaborate with an influencer who will promote a co-branded product.

If you have an expertise in fashion, food, beauty, travel, design, fitness, or any other major category, you can research brands that may be open to a long-term partnership. Ask yourself: What expertise or special skills can you offer? How do you know this will resonate with your audience? Why are you the best person for this partnership? Wow business owners with your knowledge of their industry and the research you've done on their brand and their goals. You might find that a line of knives, passport holders, yoga mats, or hydrating serums is not far from reach.

This industry is constantly changing. If you are starting now, you may think you are late to the party, but you're wrong. There are still thousands of brands trying to figure out influencer marketing and hundreds more spending millions of dollars each year on campaigns. You're fighting for a piece of the pie, but that pie is only getting bigger. **Let's get to work!** 📌



Info



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About the author

Brittany Hennessy, the first-ever Director of Influencer Strategy and Talent Partnerships at Hearst Magazines Digital Media, casts celebrities and influencers for *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Esquire*, and other titles in campaigns for the world's top fashion, beauty, and lifestyle brands. In 2007, after graduating from Rutgers University with a degree in journalism, Brittany created ChiChi212.com, which was nominated by *Paper Magazine* for "Best Nightlife Blog," and she became an influencer for Bacardi, Popchips, Svedka, and the Gap. When she was flown to Germany as the North American ambassador for Nivea just to hang out with Rihanna on a cruise ship and tweet about it, she knew it was time to make the switch from journalism to social media. Eventually, she became an expert in influencer marketing, and is now sharing her insights with aspiring influencers so they may find their passion and monetize it. You can visit her website at BrittanyHennessy.com.

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