

How not to overdo influencer marketing

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Give-to-Get vs. Pay-To-Play: Conquer Influencer Marketing By Doing Stuff That Doesn't Scale

Banner blindness is the wrong name for how consumers behave today, because it blames a **brand's** failure to connect on a format. We'd be better off thinking of it as "selling blindness." If the consumer didn't seek it out, they get good at tuning it out.

You can assume the same blindness will eventually apply to sales messages in pop ups, email blasts, "thought leadership" microsites and podcasts. If it's pushing your agenda instead of helping them with theirs, they won't see it, they won't hear it and they won't speak of it.

The same thing is starting to [happen with influencer marketing](#) via **Instagram**, **Twitter**, **YouTube** and **Pinterest**. The basic strategy is to use a talent agency to make a deal with a celebrity to insert your **brand** into their stream. It's the modern version of the product placement.

But, like with banner blindness, influencer **marketing** is at risk of diminishing returns. A celebrity might have followers in the tens of millions, [but at what point](#) does that influencer stop being credible or truly engaging those followers? Consumers can become desensitized if that person is just hawking products, and influencer deafness will become the new banner blindness. There's no word of mouth if people stop listening.

There are no shortcuts to influence

The only way to keep them listening is to "do things that don't scale," [as Paul Graham, co-founder at Y Combinator says](#). There is a ton of opportunity in the area of influencer **marketing**, mainly by working with niche communities, but impact and scale aren't necessarily going to go hand-in-hand at first.

Or, [as Jeff Bezos has put it](#):

A **brand** for a company is like a reputation for a person. You earn reputation by trying to do hard things well. People notice that over time. I don't think there are any shortcuts.

You have to do the things people can't blind themselves to and don't want to tune out because they've never seen or heard it before.

Influencers are a moving target

Leaving aside family and friends, I believe there are three kinds of influencers that marketers should be investing in right now.

Household name 'celebrity' influencers like [Kim Kardashian](#). These are mass influencers with followings in the tens of millions. And they are pay-to-play. You put a coin in, and a tweet with your **brand** mention comes out. It's very much like programmatic media buying.

Emerging celebrities who originate on new **digital** channels. **Michelle Phan**, whose homegrown beauty and makeup channel on **YouTube** now has 8 million followers, is the best known example. I think of them as power influencers. Their following may be smaller but it is more devoted and more authentic. They are still pay-to-play.

The problem with these first two categories is obvious. As soon as you turn off the spigot, the endorsement ends. They can create awareness, but unless that awareness converts into something that engages the customer and secures their commitment, it was a flash in the pan.

The third category is **organic influencers**, who are active users of a product and also active voices. I [think of them as superfans](#). They are going to talk about, blog about and tweet about their experience with your product no matter what, and in the course of a year, are they going to tell 300 people why they should buy it. You don't have to pay-to-play with superfans, but taking a give-to-get approach can help activate them.

Organic tastes better to customers

Celebrity influencer deals still do work. If you program them right, you can get a decent lift in traffic and **brand** awareness, but what really drives purchase is connection and continuity. You get that by earning a relationship in an organic way with people who themselves have organic relationships with their own communities.

You can't program for this kind of influence, and you can't spot superfan passion by just looking at traditional measures of **social** influence like Kred or [Klout scores](#). Finding them requires a different targeting strategy to find the communities that are active and then **designing** a way to connect with the most influential voices there.

Don't talk about apples to orange buyers

Every channel requires its own approach.

There are a few go-to tricks you can start with to find your superfans, but at heart it's going to require getting comfortable with bespoke, hand-to-hand tactics without being concerned with

whether or not they scale.

In most cases, an [always-on social listening campaign](#) is important so you know who is actually using and talking about your product and **brand**. I also tell clients that when they look at their incoming traffic reports, they should look way down at the end of the long tail. You'll often find micro-communities actively talking about you there, and often it's someplace new to you. (For example, Slack chat rooms are starting to pop up as a referral source lately.)

Getting to these early means finding and taking advantage of the insight before others do. Most analytics reports don't look at a few hundred page views on a scale of hundreds of thousands, but that can be the needle in the haystack your marketers and community managers need to capitalize on early opportunities.

Another place to hunt for your superfans is in emerging niches. **Reebok** turned its **brand** around in part by [spotting the CrossFit craze early and getting heavily engaged there](#). That community had less volume in 2005 when they started, but it was a place where **Reebok** could activate their audience. Esports (video game competitions) is fast-growing community now, which is why [Fortune 500 consumer packaged goods and automobile manufacturers](#) sponsor them.

In the active lifestyle category, **brands** are connecting with surf, skating and **BMX** communities. **Red Bull** energy drink got a lot of media attention by sending a man into space to parachute back to Earth, but they got big enough to do that through a more comprehensive strategy that included sponsoring pro surfers and a [professional chess player](#).

Win over superfans with the old give-to-get

But sponsorship isn't the way to make your dollars stretch and get lasting value. To activate those superfans to talk about you in an organic way, you have to use what I call give-to-get. You want to find the amateur chess club that is talking about your energy drink and, at least, send them a case. As a former chess player I can say to **Red Bull**, "Chess players need wings too!"

It's the principle of [Wharton Professor Adam Grant's Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success](#) applied to influencer **marketing**. Grant's research shows that saying yes, reaching out and helping others don't have to be time-sapping energy drains that never scale. Done right, they can be the source of motivation and productivity.

I like to try two basic questions to help start identifying give-to-gets with a lot of potential: What can the **brand** I'm working with do to provide value for this superuser, and how can we celebrate our customer's success in a way that makes them glad to celebrate your success?

You can think of it as like giving a case of energy drink to a loyal customer, except now:

- They broadcast pictures of themselves drinking the product. Have you seen the unboxing video phenomenon where people record their running commentary as they open a new product? These videos had [more than a billion views in 2014](#).
- The product or special "thing" you say or do for them can be a badge of authentic pride

in the form of a widget they put on their blog or **social** Giving influencers easy to use embed pieces of snackable microcontent can be a great way to get your **brand** front-and-center.

- The giveaway can be a chance to a chance to co-create your next product **innovation**. The [Lego Ideas Platform](#), where users submit their **design** ideas, is the killer example of this.
- The giveaway can be in the form of a sneak peek, like how [Mitsubishi provided loaners of a new SUV to popular mom bloggers](#), who then talked in an authentic way about their real experience.

If you give something without asking anything in return, then one day it will pay dividends. The goal is to generate a real connection with customers. That's when **brands** can start to flourish.

Influencer marketing done right is modern-day word-of-mouth

Instead of a conversation ending at the water cooler, influencer **marketing** is memorialized in **Google's** search engines. It leverages the fact that everyone with a smartphone can act as a journalist. Earned media used to only go through traditional public relations channels, but now it goes through every pocket or purse with a phone in it.

Mass influencers and power influencers are still important components in that process. But you can't just add those to a checklist of **marketing** tactics and expect that metrics like followers and likes are going necessarily to help your bottom line. My team is having great success with a mixture of human and machine-learning based approaches that activate influencers at a fraction of the cost with multiples on the value of the reach.

Smart **brands** are going to mix "traditional" influencer **marketing** with a program to engage the superfans in micro-communities. Those are the people who will drive efficacy for your **brand**, but you will have to work, one relationship at a time, to give them an opportunity to do so. Otherwise you're feeding a system that trains consumers to tune you out.

Image courtesy of [Digital Surgeons](#).

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