

INFLUENCING OUR NEW REALITY

INFLUENCE IN A POST COVID-19 WORLD

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Ogilvy

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INFLUENCING OUR NEW REALITY

In a time where consumers have been confined to their homes, and social contact has been limited; influence has been pulling to the forefront of our increasingly virtual reality. Where other channels have been on the back foot, unable to activate amongst social distancing, influence has found itself in a unique position.

Our industry is born out of bedrooms and built upon the ability to build virtual connections. Its agility, well suited to a climate in which circumstances change on a daily basis. During these turbulent times, it's those who we opt-in to engage with on a daily basis who we're choosing to listen to - and marketers need to take note.

However, it's also becoming apparent that we cannot look to follow a linear post-COVID-19 strategy. Instead we must look at an evolving loop for the changing stages of lockdown. One which sees strategies needing to flex and flow, depending on a rapidly changing societal structure and freedoms.

Throughout this paper, we will unpack the evolution of influencer marketing during the COVID-19 crisis. We will outline key trends that are beginning to emerge and give your brand the tools you need to inform your brand strategies moving forward.

THE STAGES OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Although many aspects of the COVID-19 crisis are unique, people's reactions to the outbreak have been extremely similar to those experienced during other major crises. As a result, we know this crisis will roughly adhere to four distinct phases, with consumer behaviours shifting at each phase to reflect their adjustments to internal and external factors. This means brands need to continually evolve their communications as the crisis continues to meet changing consumer mindset. However similarly to instances such as the Spanish Flu, COVID-19 will likely see these stages form a loop, regressing into and through varying stages of lockdown as spikes in the virus re-emerge.

While people's behaviour is changing, everyone's basic needs are still the same. We still need self-expression, development, recognition, connection, entertainment, and wellbeing (Maslow). However as the crisis has progressed, the relevance and the way each need is fulfilled has changed. Brands that have remained culturally relevant during this crisis have found ways to adapt their products and communications to meet consumer's evolving needs.

After an initial lull, influencers have become a key channel for lockdown content with their communications replacing that of brands who have been too tentative to act on their own.



This particularly true for entertainment, inspiration and enablement content. Influencer's natural creativity, authenticity and engagement is the perfect mix to satiate consumers content needs.

Isolation itself is having profound effects on people beyond just content consumption however. People are bored and they're looking for ways to express themselves. As Sandi Mann points out, boredom is "a search for neural stimulation that isn't satisfied," "if we can't find that, our mind will create it". It's hardly surprising then that along with an increase in social media usage, people are trying things they've never done before. This boredom is leading to a boom in creativity, and influencers are leading the charge. They are becoming the perfect inspiration and escape for our 'lockdown culture'.

With continued cultural and economic uncertainty on the horizon the temptation for

brands to go quiet or focus on short term sales is understandable. Yet research from previous crises and data from the current one suggests that short term activations make even less sense in this recession than the last. Instead, brands should be focused on longer term brand building unless their survival depends on servicing existing customers. It's also more important than ever for brands to defend their share of voice as there is a strong relationship between SOV and stable market share (Peter Field). Indeed, Data2Decisions also found that those brands who cut all marketing spend in year one of a recession, can take up to 5 years to catch up to those that maintained spend. Advertising budgets in past recessions were often slashed far beyond actual GDP losses, suggesting a tendency for marketers to overreact to economic turbulence. Influencers should be used as a solution here, as they allow for authentic brand building with built in scale to help secure share of voice.

HOW COVID-19 HAS AFFECTED THE INFLUENCER MARKETING LANDSCAPE

In the last year we've begun to see a real shift in the influencer landscape away from social reach, or vanity engagement metrics, toward a focus on driving real long-term brand results. Since March this trend has gone into overdrive. In fact, as we find many markets staring down a potential recession, brands are needing to prove that every dollar in their marketing budget is worth the investment. Which in turn means that influencer activations are rightfully coming under further scrutiny to prove their ROI.

But this shouldn't mean that every campaign shifts its focus onto the trackable swipe up! Yes the temptation is greater than ever to look for a quick fix activation, but as Binit and Field have proven, this is to the detriment of long term brand health. Marketers need to think beyond just short term transactions like

click-to-buy and focus on using this time of community to drive real brand growth.

It is important to remember that Influencers should no longer be categorised by a pyramid of macro, mid and micro, but by the measurable role that they can play for your brand across the marketing mix. During the pandemic, this may mean that an expert working in a brand's factory suddenly has more brand value than a lifestyle influencer who inspires people with their premium content. Using a wider spectrum of influence to ensure that brand's are answering the changes in their consumer's lives will reap rewards.

Influencers can and should be integrated at every level of the purchase funnel, and used to drive real business outcomes, especially

at a time when other disciplines cannot react at speed. Our own research has shown that for every additional channel that influence is integrated into, brands can increase ROI by up to 35%. And if adapted correctly, influence has the ability to build and protect the brand in the long-term, drive short term sales and business impact during campaigns, and aid in making the brand culturally relevant right now. We call this making brands matter for the now, near and far.

With each of these strategic horizons however, we must take heed and remember the importance of your influence vetting. As digital communities increase in strength, and dwell time is less distracted, the need for relevant influence has never been more crucial. Remember that what an influencer says about a brand goes beyond a single post. Their views, opinions and a lifetime of digitally archived beliefs become a part of the brand and so, relationships mustn't be entered into lightly.

Think stringent vetting, and a long term plan which sees fewer more valuable influencers integrated across multiple horizons and touchpoints.

INFLUENCING CONSUMER'S NEW BEHAVIOURS

1 THE NEW CULTURAL TOUCHSTONES

Influencers are usually the people we turn to discover things we didn't know about and find ways to improve our reality; whether it's a holiday destination, a trendy outfit, a newly opened restaurant or glamorous events. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, officials mandated a complete lockdown for everyone and even as the lockdown is eased, social distancing rules are in place, limiting social contact. These rules are for everyone, Influencers included; we are all equal. Therefore, people assumed Influence would die out but to the contrary, Influencers have seen an average 61% growth in their engagement and they also have seen their follower base grow, how did that happen?

For both brands and influencers being culturally relevant is a key component to providing valuable content. One of the more interesting shifts in culture as a result of the lockdown is the loss of traditional cultural touchstone moments. Popular culture is generally created through mass events such

as sports or major entertainment properties where the event is the platform for culture. With the onset of COVID-19, cultural events have become digitised and social networks are becoming both the platform for culture and the distribution medium. While sports look to be kicking-off again soon (although with its shared community and cultural watercooler remaining digitised), entertainment will continue to experience a gap as new productions can't start. Even as reintegration begins to open up the economy, productions will be months behind schedule. Influencers are uniquely positioned to exploit this development as they are already accustomed to creating serialised content series and have the distribution means to reach a mass audience looking for more entertaining and escapist content. As we move further into reintegration and towards our new normal influencers will likely still hold sway over a large audience so the opportunity or brand partnership is huge.

¹ Source: <https://stellar.io/fr/blog/faire-du-marketing-d-influence-a-l-heure-du-covid-19>

As serious as the crisis is, people need to be entertained and get their brain off the news in order to stay sane and get away from anxiety, in short people need culture. Influencers are not just a channel where things are posted, for many they are creators of culture, a mini production house with built in distribution centre. The content on TV, Netflix, etc. is planned and conforms to all of the old storytelling norms. It pushes the onus onto consumers to decide what to watch, bringing choice overload to an aspect of consumers' lives when they are often turning to it as an escape from everyday. Conversely, influencer content is highly responsive to current events and linked to culture with an authentic and unfiltered point of view (lockdown rules, PM speech, etc.). It's also entertaining (challenges, humorous videos, gym session), which makes it highly relatable. Better still, it comes neatly packaged and available on people's feed - no need to select a new movie or TV series, that job is done when users hit 'subscribe'. It is a new escape, an escape from traditional media and decision making. This is poised to be even more powerful as lockdown starts to ease and consumers seek more connection while they acclimate to their new norm.

Influencers have been playing four key roles during the pandemic:



ENTERTAINER

The bringers of joy in difficult situations. TikTok has exploded with entertaining content and Instagram live's between two accounts have seen a reawakening.



FUNDRAISER

The champions of causes, especially local ones. Facebook and Instagram easy donation mechanics have been powering their effects.



INFORMER

Bringing key messages to audiences that might not watch traditional media.



ECONOMY BOOSTER

Championing businesses (often local) that need help to survive.

Influencers are highly flexible and can react in a heartbeat to the change in policies but most of all, in people's lives. Moreover, this shows that Influence is really going back to its roots, shifting away from just serving new product discoveries but really playing an integrated role in society. It allows marketers to create meaningful relationships with their audience and further build their brand regardless of current events. Influencers really are trust beacons for their followers displaying authentic and genuine behavior.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

With the loss of cultural touchstones, social media is not only becoming the distribution media for culture, but also the platform where culture is taking root. Marketers need to be aware of how this shift will affect their annual marketing calendar.

Influencer roles and content types have shifted during the pandemic, and as the pandemic shifts into different phases marketers need to be aware of how this will affect audience relationships. Brands should expect influencers to settle into a new normal, just as wider society will also.

Long form video and serialised content streams are an interesting proposition for brand partnerships with influencers for this summer. As serialised big-production content forms such as TV and films are likely to see a production gap and influencers are in a perfect position to fill this gap for audiences.

2 HYPER-LOCAL INFLUENCE

With the rise of local communities, it's easy to see why hyper local targeting is becoming increasingly relevant. It gives brands the ability to harness local authority or the influence of an individual, to drive hyper targeted messages within a community, based on location and interests. This can be executed, either through understanding an influencer's reach demographic, or through a paid campaign which hyper targets an audience with an influencers post. Whilst not new, this tactic has seen an explosion during COVID-19, as local communities have come to the forefront. Marketers are looking for more cost efficient ways of working with influencers, and audiences are re-engaging with their local community.

For example, if local café's have decided to open to offer a take-away service, they only need to alert those living within a few miles. Working with a larger influencer who reaches all of Europe would not only be wasteful, it'd likely also eat up valuable marketing budget. Instead focusing on local influencers with engaged audiences allows brands to leverage their authenticity and targeted reach at a fraction of the cost. To make the campaign even more efficient the campaign could incorporate the influencer's content into a targeted paid strategy. This will help close the consumer loop and ensure there's enough frequency to reach the right people with the right message, ultimately improving ROI.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Think local – in a world where consumers have a renewed sense of community, the local community is becoming ever more relevant to their daily lives.

Minimise wastage – ensure campaign objectives are linked to influencer identification to maximise efficiencies and save valuable marketing budgets.

Use paid to support – tighter paid integrations offer another level of efficiency and will ensure the right people are reached at the right time.

3 THE RISE OF SOCIAL COMMERCE

The evolution and maturation of social media and online shopping is leading to the rise of Social Commerce, finally bridging the gap between customers and sellers, and creating a new way to go direct to consumers through social platforms.

Although it's too early to be definitive, studies have predicted that in the UK, 40% of all physical retail may move online following the pandemic: a 20% increase. In gravely affected countries such as Italy, 35% of the population have reduced their reliance on conventional retail and OOH consumption.

While this was already an existing trend, it's been exponentially accelerated by the pandemic. According to a global survey undertaken by EY, 42% of consumers believe the way they shop will fundamentally change during and after COVID-19 with multiple sources forecasting that Social Commerce will contribute 5-7% to global retail sales by 2022.

This shift is being underpinned and supported by rapid innovations by the social platforms themselves, such as Facebook's 'Pay' functionality providing customers with a consistent payment experience across Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp and Instagram. TikTok is also now allowing users to directly purchase items marked with a 'sponsored' hashtag.

The convergence of the rise of influencers, Social Commerce and COVID-19 means that there is a real opportunity for brands to use influencers as a key pillar in their omni-channel strategy, positioning themselves where their customers are spending more time.

In fact with the new social distancing shared reality, influencers are in an even stronger position to recommend products than before. Their living situation has never been more relatable to their audiences as they shift from aspirational to inspirational content.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Improved platform capabilities and shifts in consumer behaviour trends show the increased need to integrate social within a brand's commerce proposition

Customers are expecting more seamless experiences, and the ability to 'shop from anywhere' – marketers need to focus on closing their consumer journey loop between social content and purchase.

Influencer's product recommendations have never been more relevant for a bigger proportion of their audience.

4 EMPLOYEES AS INFLUENCERS

Employee Advocacy is a meaningful and powerful communication tool during times of crises and as a key element of the influencer spectrum, employees should be utilised for their increased relevance at this time.

Customers want to hear from people close to them and people who live similar lives, especially during a crisis such as COVID-19. They're on the front lines in stores, giving businesses a real face to consumers and are a trustworthy voice with on-the-ground insights. A general message from HQ is important, but local advocates are the ones bringing real added value to the table. In fact employee-shared content receives 8x more engagement than brand-shared content (even if it's the same piece of content) (Social Toaster)²

Trust has never been more fragile, and it can be tricky for a company to nurture that trust from just one chosen spokesperson. The cumulative voice of employees is strong, it can even be stronger than the company itself in helping get the right message across; afterall, "consumers tend to trust other people more than they do large organizations." (Dynamic Signal)³

Employees also have an added layer of expertise, above and beyond social first influencers. They can answer questions about products that others cannot, and bring an added layer of authority that will reassure consumers in unsettled times. It's why

employees should form a key part of a brand's influence strategies moving forward. Either as standalone influencers, or as an additional layer of authority to be amplified by other influencers, or the wider marketing mix. Companies shouldn't underestimate their will to help and do good for their employer or their natural ability to influence from the inside out.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Employee's can provide a real face for businesses which is vital to help consumers feel a connection with brands. Humans form connections with other humans, not businesses.

Employees bring a layer of expertise to a campaign which social influencers perhaps cannot. They can become a trusted voice of authority for a brand, and use their expertise to answer consumer questions and concerns during the consideration phase of their path to purchase.

Use employees within wider campaigns to maximise their potential. Use social first influencers to bring reach and scale to existing employee authority.

² Source: <https://www.socialtoaster.com/employee-social-media-content-sharing/>

³ Source: <https://dynamicsignal.com/2020/04/01/employee-advocacy-crisis/>

5 VIRTUAL INFLUENCER EXPERIENCES

Due to social distancing and regional lockdown, there has been an increase in the production of virtual consumer experiences. Everything from concerts being live streamed from singer's bedrooms, to brands using their experts to educate consumers and offer at-home-learning experiences. Brands are having to become creative with how they invite consumers into their world, without leaving the safety of their homes. As influencer activations often contain an interactive event or experience for both influencer and consumers, this shouldn't be lost simply because everyone is social distancing. Collaborating with influencers to understand how to bring experiences into the homes of their audiences will in turn create even closer connections between consumers and brands.

When designing at-home experiences with influencers, keep the following in mind:

- Influencer marketing often previously focused on unattainable lifestyles to be admired and worked toward. There's now been a seismic shift toward grass roots 'real-life' influence taking charge. People want less vapid curation and more educational content with purpose that they can use to influence their day to day lives. Use this new mindset to work with influencers to provide instructional content for their audience. Rather than a 30 second beauty how-to on the feed, use the lockdown to create hour long evening experiences. Live streams offer an opportunity for influencers to go into more detail about products and draw the consumer into a more intimate experience.
- When planning a virtual experience with influencers, don't assume anything. The isolation levels or government restrictions may shift and flexibility in scenarios is key. Focus on plans that are easily adaptable, and centered around the consumer, not the crisis. Look at what the campaign can bring to consumer's lives in the easiest way possible, rather than complicating the message with multiple objectives. And ensure that a virtual experience is not predicated on full lockdown being in place.
- Brands need to find ways to be distinct and cut through the noise. Influencers can be a perfect solution as they can use their personality to cut through the sea of same in regard to virtual experiences.
- As tastemakers, influencers are on the cusp of what the audience is looking for, so use their expertise. If a brand is looking to activate virtual experiences as part of their plan, use this as an opportunity to bring influencers into the creative planning process by making the brand owned event. Their skillset goes beyond an end stage activation and as digital content experts, can add layers to an event that would not come from a marketer.

6 FILLING THE PRODUCTION VOID

One in four US influencers interviewed in March (Mavrck) said they were receiving fewer collaboration offers from brands due to COVID-19, while at the same time there was a decline in engagement rates for typical types of content created for the beauty category.

In response, we've seen influencers quickly pivoting to create types of content that more strongly resonate with their audience's current needs, showing more agility than brands to react to changing circumstances. They're skillset is born out of bedrooms, and as such, they're suited to producing premium content in a socially distanced world.

By utilising influencers as part of the content production process brands are able to imbed themselves within their consumer's worlds, and create cost efficiencies between production partners and distribution. Influencers are the tastemakers of the social landscape, so their knowledge of the ever changing environment can be used to help brands stay present in the right way. Be bold and take advantage of this by working with influencers across a range of production: test and learn.

When other forms of production are unable to function, influencers can be used as at-home creation houses.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Influencers are coming out of a period of fewer brand collaboration offers so have pivoted how they market themselves to become better intune with their audience's needs. As tastemakers, they have a strong audience connection which can inform and improve the content that they produce for brands.

Utilise influencers who are adept at creating premium brand content, to help keep brand comms active when tradition production methods have become difficult. The premium nature of the content will also help cut through the see-of-same brands comms being produced by most brands during COVID-19

Use this time of constant change to 'test and learn' new production methods to future proof brand production in a post-COVID-19 world.

7 THE IMPORTANCE OF INFLUENCER VETTING

More than ever, the selection process of an Influencer is crucial for brands that want to stay relevant; the rules from the official commercial entities (ASA, FTC, etc.) are not the only ones that need to be followed.

Businesses need to prove they value the safety of their customers above all else. Therefore ensuring Influencers associated with a brand have a clear understanding of what is happening in the world and are following the proper rules is paramount.

To avoid risk, draw upon previous influencer relationships that have proved successful. This will not only ease the vetting process and increase authenticity, but reawaken an audience already au fait with a brand from previous activations.

When looking to engage new influencers, ensure stringent vetting criteria is used. Investigate not only the risk of fake followers, true reach, engagements and previous collaborations but also how the Influencer is responding to COVID-19, and whether the brand will work with their approach.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

It's no longer enough to abide by commercial disclosure guidelines, brands must also vet their influencers for adherence to local government crisis laws and social distancing guidance.

Work with influencers long term to create cost efficiencies, and build upon existing audience relationships to leverage previous authenticity and brand equity.

MOVING FORWARD

Considerations for the continued evolution of the covid-19 crisis.

THINK SHORT AND LONG. Influence shouldn't just be a quick transaction driving solution, it should be a key component of the marketing mix helping build brands across all three time horizons, now, near and far.

REMEMBER THE STATUS QUO ISN'T COMING BACK. Don't hold marketing spend back planning to ramp up communications once lockdown is over - COVID-19 is not going anywhere fast. And it has been shown that this will damage your brand in the long term. Adapt and grow within this new world.

RECONSIDER THE CULTURAL CALENDAR. The touchpoints of yesteryear are no longer relevant, brands need to be looking to digital tastemakers for the new cultural milestones of 2020

HYPER LOCAL INFLUENCE & SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES. Influence for good by using local influencers to drive real community change. Don't let strategies focus purely on the digital community, but also consider how the online presence can empower the offline community.

SOCIAL COMMERCE. Social platforms are enabling influencers to sell via their channels. Influencers can supply a gateway to consumers.

ENSURE THERE IS ADDED VALUE AND PURPOSE IN ALL COMMUNICATIONS.

Brands should be always on, but more importantly always relevant. The same goes for influencer relationships. Only get involved in the conversations that matter to the brand and with the influencers who share the brand's purpose, or risk being seen as opportunistic during this crisis.

EMPLOYEES AS INFLUENCERS. Use the full spectrum of influence. Employees can humanise brands and provide a front-line face across both internal and external comms.

VIRTUAL EXPERIENCES. Use the audience knowledge of influencers, and their at-home creativity to supercharge virtual experiences from the early planning stage. Invest in virtual community moments, as these memories will last beyond lockdown.

EMPOWER INFLUENCERS TO CREATE. Influencers are more than just distribution channels, they're also at-home creators for the wider marketing mix.

INFLUENCER BRIEFS NEED TO BE MORE FLEXIBLE. Campaigns need to be flexible to reflect the ever changing world. Contracts should reflect this.

MAKE SURE INFLUENCERS ARE ADHERING TO THE RULES. Vet not only for ad disclosure compliance, but compliance to the new social rules and government guidance, to protect against backlash via negative association.

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