

Professional Analysis

What Do the Influencers Think?

Insights into what influencers are looking for in brand partnerships

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- BRANDS WHO UNDERSTAND AND RESPECT THE INFLUENCER'S DEDICATION TO THEIR COMMUNITY**
- BRANDS WHO MAINTAIN A BALANCE BETWEEN PROVIDING DIRECTION AND ALLOWING CREATIVE FREEDOM**
- BRANDS WHO CLEARLY COMMUNICATE THEIR CAMPAIGN GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS**
- BRANDS WHO RECOGNIZE THE INFLUENCER'S SOCIAL EXPERTISE AND UNIQUE POSITION WITH CONSUMERS**
- BRANDS WHO SEEK AUTHENTIC LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS**

In the past three years, the influencer marketing industry's worth has more than doubled, with brands spending \$7 billion on this form of marketing in 2019 to a projected \$15 billion spend by 2022 (Schomer, 2019). Social media influencers have become a popular brand marketing tool that many businesses are investing in.

As a professional working in influencer marketing, I have spent most of my time ensuring that the clients' needs are met, yet I rarely ask the influencers themselves what they are looking for in these business arrangements. I began to wonder what influencers believe makes an effective brand partnership and what types of agreements and collaborations they have found to be most successful.

"I'm not even sure if I would consider myself an influencer, I guess, because I don't necessarily go out of my way to sign partnerships," Plus-Sized Influencer said. "The partnerships that I've had...almost all of them have been the companies approaching me. Occasionally I have reached out to some people whose products I really like, but more often than not, I treat it as a bonus."

Plus-Sized Influencer is not alone in her story of stumbling upon social media stardom. I spoke with ten health and fitness micro-influencers about their professional journeys and brand partnerships to determine what they are truly looking for when it comes to business relationships.

Although the interviewed influencers fall within the health and fitness industry, their responses to my questions about what they search for in brand partnerships are applicable to all industries. I have replaced these ten women's true names with monikers to provide the most honest insights about their work.

What I found is that many of their requests are intangible. Rather than asking for specific contract terms or conditions, all of the influencers highlighted a need for understanding and creative collaboration with the brands.

According to these influencers, there is a lot more to influencing than taking aesthetically pleasing photos littered with brands' products. This business of theirs is deeply personal since their work consists of sharing intimate glimpses into their everyday life.

"My Instagram has always been dictated by what is going on in my life," Bigger Than Biking Influencer said. "It's a lot of sharing my life and sharing what would normally be really private things for people that they don't want to talk about – I talk about it."

It is no secret why influencers are valuable marketing tools yet little research has been done from the influencers' perspective. I took a deep dive into what influencers are looking for as business

professionals, giving influencers the chance to describe what they are searching for in brand partnerships.

Brands Who Understand the Influencer's Dedication to Their Community

Influencers have carefully curated their own brand in a similar but even more personal manner than other business professionals. Influencers grow and profit off sharing glimpses into their own lives, knowing that this is what truly engages their audience.

“I think brands now are slowly realizing that something that feels like an ad, that feels salesy, that feels like the perfect scenario, doesn't always resonate with the community and then there's no point to it,” Vegan Influencer said.

While these windows into their personal lives may be filtered and edited to perfection, their brand is truly built upon their personality and lifestyle.

“I've grown a lot through [my profile page], and so it's grown with me,” College Influencer said. “It's more about empowering other people but also keeping it real with the stuff that I do.”

Because an influencer's work is so personal, it is especially critical that brand marketers understand the influencer's own brand and respect the relationships they have built with their followers over time. Influencers create these communities by opening their personal lives up for public consumption, allowing others to follow and engage with their experiences and join a community of like-minded people.

“People kind of think, even if you've never met them, that you guys are kind of friends,” Plus-Sized Influencer said. “So they're like, ‘okay, if my friend is recommending this, because I trusted her with all this other stuff, I'll trust her now, too.’”

Brand marketers must understand that the influencer knows what their community responds well to and that their community is familiar with the influencer's brand. This makes it easy for influencers to create content that their followers will engage with and for their followers to notice when the influencers are straying from their own voice.

“A brand who is hiring me and understands that what they want is my voice is a better fit than someone who's pretty much just hoping I'm going to post their advertisement word for word,” Running Influencer explained.

Ensuring that the influencer likes the product is not enough to secure a partnership. The brand must also convey a knowledge of how their product aligns with the influencer's brand identity and their community's needs and expectations.

“We had a campaign where we loved the brand. We were super excited about it, we shot the whole thing, we pitched them our take on it, but it just wasn't right,” Twin Influencer said. “They wanted a different voice to it. We couldn't come to an agreement and we had to pass on it.”

Brand marketers should always enter into negotiations with their own influencer brand research in hand, including an understanding of the influencer's tone and content.

“The best partnerships are when people have clearly been stalking [my profile] for a minute because then they have an idea of how I present things, how I speak, and what they're going to get when they do a brand partnership with me,” Plus-Sized Influencer said. “That way when they come along, there isn't, ‘Oh, why did you say it like that?’ If you look at the history of what I've done in partnerships this shouldn't be a surprise.”

Brands Who Maintain a Balance Between Providing Direction and Creative Freedom

Influencers have more to offer than just their voice and community, and many are looking for a partnership that allows them to take on an active role in the campaign.

Influencers are searching for a happy medium between direction and creative freedom. Brand partnerships are a business arrangement for influencers as well and meeting the brand's objectives while also staying true to their identity is a top priority.

“Give your influencers creative freedom and an understanding that you're working with them because you like their content,” Twin Influencer said. “It's great to have some type of direction — having no direction makes it incredibly difficult — but being super restrictive is way too hard.”

Influencers are open to campaign mandates, such as required phrases or hashtags, but when the brand's feedback crosses the line into censorship, the influencer is much less inclined to comply.

“If you're approaching me and asking me to partner, I'm going to assume that you know I run these Internet streets naked and cursing, and no one is going to ask me to change that,” Plus-Size Influencer said.

The personal nature of an influencer's work has led to their desire to take an active role in the campaign, including more than just using their lingo and content. For one influencer, the best form of collaboration begins at the product testing stages.

“There’s this brand that I really like that is taking another approach that I’m really excited about,” Dancing Influencer said. “It’s not just like a regular ambassadorship, but more like, ‘Hey, you’re going to come to our corporate office; you’re going to be in a focus group with us and we’re going to ask you some things about what you like about our clothing. We want you to try on the samples and give us feedback.’”

Another influencer commented on the value of an open, honest dialogue at the outset of the partnership.

“I actually respect companies that are like ‘Look, our diversity sucks; we need you.’ I will happily help them with that,” Plus-Sized Influencer said. “In some cases, maybe even go out of my way if I need to. If I feel like they’re trying to do better, I will gladly be the token or the first one, but if I don’t get the sense that that is important, then I’m like, ‘we’re done.’”

Brands Who Clearly Communicate Their Goals and Expectations

Communication is key in any business relationship, especially in an industry where there are no clear standards. The novelty of social media and influencers has led to inconsistency when it comes to how brand partnerships are structured and managed. Every partnership is unique, which makes it especially important for clear communication from both ends.

“Upfront, it really helps when they have a goal in mind or are able to say, ‘This is the type of aesthetic we’re looking for’ or, ‘This is what the campaign is about’,” Running Influencer said. “A lot of times they will come to me and say, ‘We’re just open to whatever you want to do,’ which is also fine but makes me nervous as to whether I’m going to actually land on exactly what they were hoping for or not. So it’s much easier if they have clear expectations up front.”

Both the influencer and brand should have clear objectives in mind when it comes to deliverables, KPIs, and compensation. Not only will this make the campaign more successful, but it will also set a standard of open dialogue between the brand and the influencer moving forward.

“You always want to be nurturing that relationship,” Empower Influencer said. “You really need to ask them like, ‘Hey, what are you focusing on and how can I help you drive awareness,’ because although it’s about you, it’s not so much about you.”

Influencers have experienced issues in previous campaigns that are a result of unclear communication or unrealistic expectations from the brand. A lack of clarity regarding the creative direction of the campaign has left many influencers having to reshoot or recreate their content and unwilling to work with the brand on future campaigns.

“I recently had an experience with a company that I'm working with where we agreed to the set of deliverables, we agreed to the rate, we agreed to the date that content needs to be delivered, and the content was delivered on time,” Balanced Influencer explained. “We are now on round six of changes and I will never work with them again. I don't care if they offered me \$100,000.”

Oftentimes, influencers will receive free products, rather than monetary compensation, in exchange for their time and willingness to create content. Many influencers referenced the brand's clear lack of understanding of the time and energy it takes to create and share their content while also meeting the campaign objectives.

“A lot of times the clothing companies that send you free products have a lot of outlandish requests,” Balance Influencer said. “Like you get the shipment today and then tomorrow a message in your inbox, saying, ‘When will you post?’ Like sis, I just got the product.”

Many influencers recognize their lack of knowledge of the business world and seek outside help to represent themselves as business professionals and advocate on their behalf.

“I signed on with a talent agency and that was wonderful,” Nursing Influencer said. “Every brand deal that was coming into my inbox, I just forwarded right to them so they could negotiate on my behalf, and they brought some opportunities my way too.”

Now that social media and influencers have been around for some time, many influencer campaigns are run by PR and marketing agencies. Managing influencer campaigns is these marketing professionals' fulltime job, and they have developed more formal and effective processes than brands looking to run these campaigns themselves.

“PR companies are the best to work with because that's their job. Worse is actually dealing with the brand directly,” Bigger Than Biking Influencer said.

Agencies offer a more professional approach to influencer campaigns that many brands have not yet caught on to. These PR professionals will come to the table after conducting research, provide the influencer with a contract that includes realistic deliverables and turn-around times, and offer reasonable compensation for their work.

This can create a more efficient and enjoyable experience for the influencer since expectations are clear and communication is seamless, incentivizing influencers to create higher quality content and work with brands again and again. Brand marketers interested in taking on this role themselves must meet this level of professionalism when approaching influencers with a business deal.

Brands Who Recognize the Influencer's Social Expertise

Working on social media platforms requires constant learning and experimenting. With ever-changing algorithms, the emergence of new platforms, and constant trend updates, influencers are always looking for new ways to successfully engage with their audience. What may have worked last month is unlikely to provide the same results the next time around.

“I get so many questions [from followers] on a daily basis that it gives me a little bit of a clue as to what people are looking for right now,” Running Influencer explained. “I’m watching those comments to see like, ‘Okay, a lot of people are very confused about this topic,’ so I can dive into it more. Instagram stories have been a great place because people are so responsive to polls.”

Influencers recognize the need to find a balance between understanding what their followers are currently looking for and what recent updates are impacting their content’s performance. As a result, a large portion of an influencer’s work involves testing new ideas, similar to what the industry refers to as A/B testing.

“Everything has changed as a result of me learning and experimenting,” Vegan Influencer said. “Whether it’s researching something online, watching a video, taking a course, reading a book—it is a constant evolution.”

For some influencers, directly asking their followers questions allows them to remain at the forefront of current interests and to let their community know that they are listening.

“Usually I’ll be like, ‘Hey, what are you struggling with this week?’ or like, ‘What made you feel good this week?’ just so they know that they’re being heard,” Empower Influencer said.

Others view this approach as not truly knowing your audience.

“I cringe when bloggers are like, ‘What do you want to see from me?’ Do you really need to ask that?” Bigger Than Biking Influencer said. “They are following you because of what you do post. They want to see what you are posting and you can see what is a successful post.”

Influencers must remain up-to-date on their community’s interests and recent platform trends for their own brand’s success. They also seek to surpass the campaign goals outlined by their partnering brands.

“Making sure that we’re both getting the results that we want is really important to me,” Vegan Influencer said. “You know, I don’t ever want somebody to feel disappointed, but sometimes you can’t help it if they have a different idea of how they want things to go than you do.”

It is important for brands to acknowledge the influencers' expertise with social platforms and their community, and place trust in testing new suggestions or campaign ideas that the influencer brings to the table. This may mean setting aside a portion of your campaign budget to testing, asking influencers to produce two different forms of content to see which performs better, or requesting that influencers ask their community for feedback.

Brands Who Seek Authentic Long-Term Partnerships

Influencers are known for their authentic approach to marketing products, and every influencer named remaining authentic to their true selves as their main priority.

“You’ve got to set your boundaries; you can’t mold into what people want you to be,” Empower Influencer said.

In order to maintain this authenticity, influencers have two main strategies: only working with brands that fit their values and interests and striking a balance between organic and sponsored content. This allows them to provide their own valuable content in addition to introducing their audience to new products that align with the influencer’s brand.

“The other day I did an ad for a national sporting goods brand, but I paired it with a workout,” Empower Influencer said. “So it's like ‘Hey here's value for you. By the way, this outfit is sold by this national sporting goods brand.’ So, they can do my workout and maybe go to the sporting goods store.”

Rarely are brand partnerships the main source of income for influencers. This allows them to be selective when choosing partners. A long-term opportunity is more appealing not only from a financial perspective but also because it is viewed as more authentic to the influencer’s community, leaving many influencers leaning towards long-term partnerships rather than flashing single-product posts in front of their followers.

“We think long-term ones are a lot more authentic and genuine because if I'm going to be doing a one-off post as opposed to something that's a product I've been using for six months,” Twin Influencer said, “I think that kind of conveys to our followers a lot more that we truly do love the service and product.”

Influencers can receive hundreds of brand requests each week, some of which they may consider but many of which they will turn down. They search for brands and products that are representative of who they are and what they think their followers will respond well to. Many influencers refuse to represent a product that they have not tried yet.

“I must test the product before I agree to work with you,” Running Influencer said. “Oddly, there are a lot of people who do not do that.”

Running Influencer also highlights how her business structure allows her to be more selective with brand partnerships.

“I have multiple streams of revenue, so I’m not feeling beholden to meeting sponsors,” she said. “I think that honestly for almost any influencer, the biggest growth step is once you're more diversified.”

Influencers are more open to these free, single ad partnerships at the start of their career, but the overall goal is to secure long-term brand partnerships.

“Now I feel like I'm at the point where I don't need more free leggings. I'm past the free stuff,” Plus-Size Influencer said. “It’s less about how monetization changes what I post and it's more of ‘Are we going to do this partnership or not?’”

Once influencers build a strong sense of trust with their community and feel that their brand is truly representative of who they are, their desire for substantial partnerships continues to grow. Influencing is about more than aesthetically pleasing product placement. It is about honing their personal brand, building an ecosystem of followers, and leading this community to authentic, high-quality products for more than just a free pair of leggings.