Social Media Influencers in a PR Landscape

PR Tactics 2

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In a society with an increasing amount of social media usage, almost everyone has at least one moment of concern or thought when it comes to their online reputation and how others on social media perceive them. It’s a common thought and occurrence to see someone on social media and automatically judge or interact with them based on the content they’re providing, whether it be a shared interest or conflicted interest you want to give your input about. However, some people are more concerned and focused on their own ‘personal branding’ on the internet and how their reputation is showcased to their followers or the audience around them, and most of these people often use others’ help to maintain a beneficial relationship between themselves and the public. Social media influencers are rapidly changing the platforms of Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and every other social media outlet by persuading their audiences with brand deals, sponsorships, and showcasing the ‘picture perfect life’. Not only are they making a career out of utilizing social media, they’re changing what it means to represent oneself by building a relationship with their followers and overall internet viewers through public relations.

The social media landscape has changed drastically over the past few years. With younger demographics joining social media websites every day, there’s more media consumption than ever before. The younger demographic growing up in a social media world are becoming more susceptible to believing that everything they’re seeing online is real. They see their favorite Instagram account, YouTube content creator, or TikTok influencer’s lifestyle and automatically think that everything they’re being shown is happening in real time. In this social media age, most people online are becoming more impressionable to what they’re seeing. They’re easily persuaded into thinking that the life they see of their favorite influencer is easily achievable by uploading content online and that they’re able to make a living doing it. They buy their favorite YouTuber’s merchandise, order a product from an Instagram ad, and listen to the music that their favorite TikTok star listens to, yet don’t even realize that they’re the one contributing to the success of the influencer. The lifestyles projected onto social media may seem effortless and common, but what everyday users of social media are failing to realize is that they’re often an entire management and public relations team behind what the influencer is posting.

Research done by Archer and Harrigan showcased the realizations that individuals started having as they began posting more and gaining influence over their followers, leading them to be considered an influencer. “It started getting serious and you can start making money from it…I had been doing it for so long and I felt like I had earnt this right to be a play and I wanted to do it” (2016). While most made realizations that they could make money from blogging or posting content online, others wanted to do it for convenience, “It’s now become more, it’s my means of staying at home with my girls…in some ways there’s a lot more flexibility to it…” (2016). Whatever the reason may be for monetizing a social media account, a lot of those involved in the research realized they needed more than just themselves to become successful, with increased attraction comes increased responsibility, which is where a PR team comes into play.

Public relations (PR) itself has grown an increased importance in today’s society. Brands, organizations, and individuals are finding themselves needing to learn how to build and continue to obtain a mutually beneficial relationship between themselves and their publics. Maintaining strong, open, and transparent communication has always been a key point of public relations (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). They not only want to make the right impression, but they want to grow their audience and be able to fix any reputation problems they may have. Public relations practitioners are aware that they need to be able to adapt to every kind of situation they may run into in their career field. However, as influencers and independent people turn to the internet and social media to create their own brand or lifestyle that actively involves the public, practitioners’ need to learn how their career field is changing and be able to adapt to those changes whether they may be positive or negative.

Conventional theories of public relations focused on relationship building with two-way communication. However, as influencers and social media become a more prominent way of representing a brand or organization, there’s a stressed importance on adapting (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). PR practitioners are learning to understand the influence that they have on the influencers’ and the reputation they can help them project on their social media accounts. Helping a beginning influencer understand and figure out what they want their personal brand to be, what goals and opportunities they want to achieve, and what their audience wants to see are all important steps to creating a successful career in the social media climate. Focusing on relationship development is a key concept in an influencer building trust with their followers. Those working in the PR field are beginning to use social media to work with more people. They’re starting to look at the number of followers or reach an account has, the credibility they have, and the audience and relationship strength the influencer has (Aquino, 2013). Working with influencers and helping them build a following through their work not only benefits the influencer, it makes the practitioner more credible with expansion in their work field.

Through work with social media influencers, practitioners are able to adapt and become skilled at choosing who could be the best representation with the best intended audience for their work (Aquino, 2013). This new emergence of PR work allows them to build up a hefty list of clientele that can help their overall experience in the long run. If a practitioner is able to find an influencer with a small following and work with them to build up their account with not only followers but brand deals, sponsorships, increased influence and follower interaction, it proves so much for their own career and reputation. A lot of smaller influencers put a lot of trust into their PR team due to such a big different from traditional media to social media. “Some of them [clients] are just, you know, are really scared. What we always find is, after we’ve done the campaign…because it’s such a different experience to mainstream media coverage, because it’s so immediate, you can see whether it was successful or not very quickly” (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). PR teams become a backbone for influencers as they learn the ups and downs of trying to gain traction and success with their own personal brands, nothing is ever guaranteed success and with so much competition on social media, being able to create continued success for someone making a living off of their personal social media accounts is really impressive.

Social media influencers are known to have a strong power of influence over those that follow them. Their followers see a lifestyle that they either find interesting, entertaining, or want to have. With younger generations joining social media at a younger age, people are growing up learning that their ‘ideal’ of what life looks like is attainable from their favorite influencers. Due to this influx in social media, influencers are learning that there’s a lot of responsibility and opportunity. Social media influencers are realizing that there is a growing need for representation in their own line of work. While it may be easy for most people in today’s social media society to post a picture on Instagram, it becomes more complex when you grow a following and learn you can make money off of that following. Influencers are starting to realize that they’re able to gain access to so many more brands, organizations, and products as they grow a following and with that realization comes the opportunity to gain brand sponsored posts, free product, and an opportunity for follower growth. An influencer showcasing a brand’s content, product, or expertise with added attractiveness and identity can not only boost the brand’s morale and sales but builds a trust with the influencer’s followers that they are only promoting products they use themselves (Gashi, 2017). As PR practitioners’ pair up with influencers to help represent them, the task of working with brands, organizations, and their own followers becomes a little bit easier. Practitioners are not only able to help the influencer create brand deals and gain contact with brands the influencer may not have been able to reach for a deal, practitioners’ help teach the influencer more effective ways to connect and build trust with their audience. While it may be easy to learn how to reply to a comment or follow someone on social media, it can be quite difficult learning how to reply and connect with so many people at one time. Influencers’ need to learn how to communicate with a large audience in a way that seems genuine and considerate. PR practitioners can help with this by not only suggesting how to help build relationships, but by giving them the ‘do’s and don’ts’ of what may or may not be offensive to post on social media (Archer & Harrigan, 2016).

Learning how to work with influencers has been a big change in the PR landscape, but as PR professionals work with them, they also learn how to effectively connect them with big brands and organizations. Brands and organizations are turning to influencer-based marketing and outreach more than ever. As more people purchase items online, brands and PR practitioners need to learn how to create a strategy that will be the most relatable to their customers and the public to influence them to interact with an influencer and make a purchase (Clark, 2010). A majority of the public makes purchases for the social approval of their friends or those around them, so brands are reaching out to influencers to advertise their products knowing that the influencer’s followers want to achieve a lifestyle similar to theirs. As an influencer rises on social media platforms, their representation by a PR professional is of key importance. PR professionals need to be able to give statistics, reports on their clients’ accounts, and effectively communicate the expected outcome if a brand connects with that client. The more followers, likes, and comments an influencer has, determines a lot of their eligibility on if they get a brand deal or not (Granjon & Benedic, 2017). Organizations want to be represented by influencers who are known to have a continual rate of success, so it’s important that PR practitioners are able to help make the connection between their client and the brand or organization.

Due to the power that influencers have to persuade mass audiences with a simple picture, organizations and brands have been teaching their own PR practitioners’ how to notice the potential in an influencer from the other end of the spectrum. To determine how to choose an influencer, a study done with YouTube videos was done (Freberg, et al. 2011). In the study, influencer YouTube videos were selected on a basis of length and context. After viewing the videos, college students answered questions to determine the value of the attributes the influencer perceived (Freberg, et al. 2011). Based on the results, the participants viewed the influencers as verbal, smart, ambitious, productive and poised. Most people tend to listen to those who are seen as leaders, so the influencer profiles were then compared to the profile of a CEO to help determine if they possessed the same qualities. Those observing the two profiles saw a lot of overlap, which helps organizations determine if the influencer has similar values and influential power in relation to the product they want promoted. By completing the study, those in charge of finding and connecting with influencers for an organization, are able to further understand the importance of audience recognition and relationships to build the bridge with the public.

In order to further understand social media influencers and trends, research was done on Twitter. Influencers were determined by three different measures: the number of tweets posted by the user, the number of mentions by other users for each user, and the number of retweets for each user (Shen, et al, 2017). The research allowed practitioners to understand what times are best for an influencer to post or interact with their followers. From the research they found, the afternoon is typically the best time for engagement. Learning through research and finding information like this is really important when it comes to brand deals and overall engagement. For example, if an influencer is supposed to post about a product for a brand, it’s important that they do so at the time where their reaching their max audience. It allows for not only the brand to make money from sales, but it allows for the influencer to make more money due to the fact that they usually make a percentage of every sale from their post.

As more influencers gain the opportunity to make a living through paid promotions and endorsements, the line of ethics is becoming more and more difficult to understand. Many of those in the public relations field who primarily use traditional media outlets for their work, are struggling to understand if online promotion done on social media is truthful or not. Non-disclosure of paid endorsements challenges the concept of openness and truth, which can cause issues for the followers of an influencer who are seeing the advertisement, but for the sponsoring organization as well (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Legal systems and industry regulatory bodies are having a hard time catching up and adapting to the new ways of promotions. It’s really important for organizations their PR practitioners to understand the presence of disclosure, or lack of disclosure when they’re impacting the relationship an influencer has with their followers and the relationship the organization has with their own publics (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). While sponsored posts can have benefit for both parties involved, it can cause distrust if done the wrong way where the followers/audience think the post is genuine and unpaid.

Influencers themselves have realized that even though there are perks to receiving free products in PR packages or being invited to events in exchange for an Instagram story, it can be difficult to draw a personal line for their own morals and values. Bloggers discussed the expectations of brand representatives and the issues that became pretty familiar to them (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). They found themselves writing or posting about a product whether or not they used, would use, or felt it was useful to others. It often led to a spiral of posts about brands and products that they necessarily didn’t believe in, they were just posting about it because someone wanted them to and they were being paid for it (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). It’s important that influencers and brands or organizations work together to create a mutually beneficial way of promoting a product or service while still maintaining the values each party have placed and instilled on their public image (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). No one wants an outcome that causes distrust, invalid feelings, and loss of money.

In the midst of an influencer crazed social media world with brand deals and sponsored posts it’s still important to keep social media organic and as real as possible. Those on social media don’t want to be consumed by posts that have little to no value or meaning to them. It’s not a job for everyone, and its simply entertainment for those who aren’t involved on the inside of influencer relations or PR agencies. Most people still just see their favorite influencers as someone they may look up to or aspire to be like, which is okay. No matter what the subject may be when it comes to social media, everyone is still adapting to the everyday changes and advancements that become available to us.

The social media world is changing everyday with every new post, influencer, or content creation found. The ‘career’ of an influencer is still a relatively new subject that most people in the public relations world are getting used to. It’s a new curveball that will take time and experience to understand. It takes a lot of learning and researching on how to make ourselves in the PR world and the influencers successful. Using social media as a tool to expand careers, influence the public, and build relationships is an increasing tactic. Whether we’re influenced or not, is up to us.

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