

# Influencer logic: How influencer relations works

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## ABSTRACT

Where should the role of influencer relations live within a communication department? The results of this study suggest that influencer relations is most at home under the public relations (PR) umbrella. To help explain why PR professionals are best positioned to manage the influencer relations functions this author has proposed the JIM (Journalism, Influencer, Marketing) Disclosure Approval Continuum. In addition, this author proposes a conceptual model for understanding the ideal influencer relations workflow (brand to influencer) and non-ideal (agency-mediated). Finally, this author proposes a 12-phase for effective influencer campaigns. The stated goal of this authors research to help communicators and influencers come to understand the role of influencer relations or what she calls "Influencer Logic". By finding mutual understanding of the rules of engagement influencers and brands will have more harmonious relationships with each other and ideally achieve more mutually beneficial results.

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Recently, "Influencer Marketing" is an increasingly used phrase. However, is the domain of 'marketing' the right fit for the practice of seeding stories with influencers? In 2016 to 2017 there was a 325% increase in searches for the term 'influencer marketing' (Connick, 2018, p. 9). People tend to search for things they are seeking more information on. As working with influencers becomes more normal we must address how best to carry out this function within communication practice. The 'social media influencer' is a relatively new idea, as are the platforms the influencer uses to communicate to their virtual communities on. The top-five Social Networking Sites (SNS) in order of founding are: Facebook (est. 2004), YouTube (est. 2005), Twitter (est. 2006), Instagram (est. 2010), and Snapchat (est. 2011). In 2019, the

landslide of use of influencers over traditional media has caused brands to turn to Digital Word-of-Mouth Marketing (eWOMM). Backaler (2018) articulated what this means for traditional media, "The days of 'interruption marketing' through disruptive ads are ending - people want to learn from trusted peers, not faceless companies" (p.18). These trusted peers are influencers who use eWOMM to speak to virtual communities of consumption. Kozinets (1999) defines this as: "a specific subgroup of virtual communities that explicitly center upon consumption-related interests" (p.254).

## Review of literature

### **Influencer Marketing**

Influencers are defined as; "individuals with the capability of affecting the opinions or actions of others" (Boone, Kurtz, Mackenzie, & Snow, 2016, p.112). Today, the idea that our social 'feeds' influencing our day-to-day life decisions as normalized saying; "The only thing 'new' about influence is the speed at which it now permeates everything we do. Thanks to the fluidity of the social sphere in which we all live, work, and play" (Backaler, 2018, p.7). Hearn (2010) described this sphere; "No longer concerned with simply fixing a logo to a product, branding practices increasingly attempt to establish virtual contexts for consumption; experiences, spaces, relationships are all branded" (p.426).

Celebrities were the original "influencers." Their influence, however, was heavily dependent on the approval of industry gatekeepers due to content being expensive to produce, and requiring specialized knowledge and expertise (Backaler, 2018. p.31). Today's influencers are celebrities made in the social media landscape and are content creators in their own right.

These influencers are part of what has been coined the "attention economy" (Bueno, 2016), or "digital reputation economy" (Gandini, 2016, Hearn 2010). This is essentially living an online, self-branded representation of the self in which as Hearn (2010) said is "a form of affective, immaterial labour that is purposefully undertaken by individuals to garner attention, reputation, and potentially, profit" (p.427).

## Digital word-of-mouth marketing (eWOMM)

Arndt (1967) defined word-of-mouth as “a consumer-dominated channel of marketing communication where the sender is independent of the market. It is therefore perceived to be more reliable, credible, and trustworthy by consumers compared to firm-initiated communications” (As cited in Brown, Broderick, and Lee, 2007, p. 4). We are now in the era of what Kozinets et. al. (2010) coined the Networked Coproduction Model where “Marketers have become interested in directly managing eWOMM activity through targeted one-to-one seeding and communication programs, with the Internet allowing unprecedented new levels of management and measurement of these campaigns” (p.72). The key change from previous models known as Organic Interconsumer Influence Model and Linear Marketing Influence Model is that the relationship between marketers has shifted from being transactional to relationship based (Kozinets et. al., 2010, p.73). Takemura (2012) noted brands are turning consumers into “brand publicists” who are encouraged to share and spread news and information on their social media (p. 33).

### **Relationship-building with influencers**

The role or responsibility of managing the relationships with this group is known as ‘influencer relations’: “The liaison between a company and those considered to be influencers within the social media community” (Boone, Kurtz, Mackenzie, & Snow, 2016, p.112).

Smith (2010) identified three phases of the evolution of bloggers (fore-runner to influencers): introduction, community membership, and autonomy (2010, p.176). In the first phase, which Smith (2010) refers to as introduction, bloggers begin with a personal purpose and use the internet as an outlet to explore that topic or genre. In the second phase, community membership, they gain a following and with that their motivation moves from personal purpose to being useful to their community. Finally, in the autonomy phase, the blogger feels intensified ownership over content creation (p.176). A recent report found “62% of brands compensate influencers as brand ambassadors or partners rather than one-time contractors” (Connick, 2018, p.10).

## Methods

This study used in-depth participant interviews as the primary data collection technique. N=10 interviews took place between February 12 – March 30, 2019. With few exceptions, the sample agreed to be identified (MREB, 2019-001). This qualitative data set included N=5 case studies of pre-existing relationships between influencers and communication professionals. The recruitment of cases was accomplished by picking a representative sample of influencer and communication professionals and then asking each member of the sample to recommend a person who they believe to be “exceptional at influencer relations or working with influencer relations specialists.” This is known as a snowball sample method of participant recruitment (Krueger and Casey, 2015, p. 84).

Cross-case analysis is referred to by Yin (2014) as “multiple-case design” and is “considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust (p. 57).” The multiple case studies have been examined using cross-case analysis in order to identify themes (Eisenhardt 1989, as cited in Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, and Casey, 2015). Yin, 2002, said:

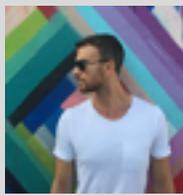
When using a multiple-case design, a further question you will encounter has to do with the number of cases deemed necessary or sufficient for your study. However, because a sampling logic should not be used, the typical criteria regarding sample size also are irrelevant. Instead, you should think of this decision as a reflection of the number of case replication (p. 50).

In the case of this study, after 5 pairs of interviewees, substantial case replication was observed, and the researcher decided that the sample had reached a saturation point at which clear patterns emerged.

## *Sample*

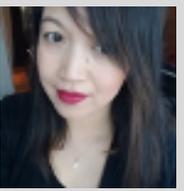
A total sample of N=10 was obtained. Influencers totaled n=5 and communicators totaled n=5. This resulted in N=5 case studies representing a variety of relationships between influencers and communicators. The sample was 100% Canadian, 10% male (n=1) and 90% female (n=9). The influencer industry is female dominated, a 2019 study by Klear influencer platform found 77% of influencers are women (Gesenhues, 2019, p. 1).

**Exhibit 1: Influencer Sample Comparison**

<b>Kate Wallace</b>	<b>Eric Radford</b>	<b>Jill Amery</b>	<b>Amber MacArthur</b>	<b>Christine McNaughton</b>
@emmettsabcs	@EricRadford85	@urbanmom-mies	@ambermac	@lifeonmanitoulin
Est. 2016	Est. 2017	Est. 2008	Est. 2006	Est. 2006
				
Type: Micro Category	Type: Mid Celebrity	Type: Micro Category	Type: Macro Celebrity	Type: Micro Micro

For the purposes of this study, “Influencers” are those who are paid to produce content about brands, products, or services in a range of their own social spaces. The influencers ranged in “type” of influencer from micro (n=3), to mid (n=1), to celebrity (n=1). Type of influencer was based on two scales. First scale is Connick (2018): micro 0-25,000; mid 25,001-100, 000; and macro 100, 000+. Second influencer types were proposed by Backaler (2018): celebrity (fame amassed by traditional media); category (expertise in a topic with authority); micro (expertise in an area without authority) (p.36-38).

**Exhibit 2: Communicator Sample Comparison**

<b>Aly Tsourounis</b>	<b>Emily Ward</b>	<b>Jen Maier</b>	<b>Muriel Rosilio</b>	<b>Michelle Mullins</b>
				
<i>Principal, Hank PR</i>	<i>Co-Founder, Shine PR/Shine Influencers</i>	<i>VP of Social and Influ- encer Marketing, Company not disclosed</i>	<i>President, Farago Media Inc.</i>	<i>Digital Marketing Manager Inter- nal, Company not disclosed</i>

For the purposes of this study, the ‘communicator sample’ all worked in some capacity with influencers in their current job. This group represent a variety of positions including talent manger/publicist (n=1), influencer agent (n=1), digital marketing specialist external (n=1), digital marketing specialist internal (n=1) and public relations specialist (n=1). All work at a senior or management level. This study is comprised of communication professionals who live in Toronto (n=5). The business or agency size by number of employees was: micro (1-10) n=2; small (11-50) n=1; medium (51-249) n=1; large (250+) n=1.

## Findings

### *Influencer relations and the PR tipping point.*

Is “influencer marketing”, a common term for influencer relations, a misnomer? When participants were asked, “which department is better at handling influencer relations - public relations or marketing?”, public relations edged marketing out with 50% (n=5) of the total respondents saying they felt it should be a role primarily managed by those with a public relations skill set. The remaining 50% were split with 30% (n=3) saying both or either and 20% (n=2) preferring the marketing department.

To this question, the communicator sample and the influencer sample returned very different answers. The communicator sample is evenly split between public relations professionals and marketing professionals: two of the marketers and two of the PR professionals, perhaps unsurprisingly, answered along “party lines” and elected for their own specialities to take the lead. The swing vote for communicators was influencer agent Rosilio who said: “It just didn’t matter, I dealt with all of them... So much depends on the client, the campaign, and who they were hiring to do the job.” This suggests that the jury is still out, even within the field of communications, about who owns the role of influencer relations.

However, looking at the influencer sample responses, a clearer answer emerges: 60% (n=3) saying they prefer to work with public relations, 20% (n=1) said the job was best handled by either PR or marketing, and 20% (n=1) who said the job is better handled by marketing. MacArthur said that, in her view, there has been a shift of influencer outreach moving from marketing-led to public relations-led:

I have found for the majority of the influencer marketing campaigns that I do I have been dealing with the PR team either at the brands themselves or the agency that they hire on now. It's just kind of been a gradual shift because originally, I think what I would see is that the marketing departments would reach out to me but now it's almost entirely PR... I think in about 2017 there was a bit of a tipping point at least in my perspective.

A tabulation of reasons given by interviewees on both sides for preferring one area of practice over the other revealed three functional reasons for this "public relations tipping point", they are: (1) PR's innate understanding that influencers will not allow full control of their content and messaging (n=8); (2) A shift to "pay-for-play" and a shrinking pool of journalists in traditional media makes getting earned media more challenging for PR professionals. Influencers have become the new earned media (n=4); (3) PR has a greater understanding of long-term relationship management (n=3). In contrast, the top three functional reasons for why marketing should lead influencer relations included; (1) bigger budgets/paid media (n=6); (2) an understanding of overall marketing strategy (n=3); (3) more adept at social media algorithms (n=1)

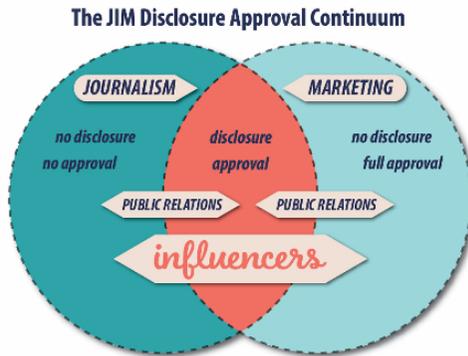
Lending her voice to why public relations is better to handle influencer relations, influencer, McNaughton said: "I felt that public relations within a company would have handled influencer relations better than the marketing department...There were times where marketing didn't "get" some of the intricacies of a campaign that the public relations department probably would." On the PR agency communicator side, Ward articulates what those "intricacies" are:

We often times are advocating for our talent against the brand, being like: *it's not advertising*. You are guaranteeing the space, but the voice, the opinion: that is theirs. You don't own that. And that is more PR minded. When I think of marketing, I think of full control. They work with a creative team, they have full approval of that ad, and they have full control of where that ad is going to go because they buy it. It's not that - it's somewhere in between."

The "somewhere in between" that Ward references is a space between journalism and marketing that social media influencers have come to occupy as a new medium. To help explain this finding Exhibit 3: The JIM (Journalism, Influencer, Marketing) Disclosure Approval Continuum is a visual model of why public relations is best positioned to manage the role of influencer relations. It is not just the source of payment but also the legal and ethical neces-

sity of disclosure of “paid partnerships”, using hashtags like #ad and #sponsored and other disclosure language, that is a key differentiator of influencers. Influencer participant Amery puts it this way: “disclosure is what separates journalists from influencers.” Journalists have journalistic independence and a code of professional ethics that prohibits them from engaging in conduct that would constitute a conflict of interest, which would include taking payment from the subjects of their journalism; in principle, this allows them the freedom to engage in journalism that is assumed by their audiences to be fair, balanced and without bias. On the other hand, influencer content is not pure advertising, which is one reason why influencers may prefer to work with PR.

Exhibit 3: The JIM Disclosure Approval Continuum



In brief, this model illustrates that the realm of journalism requires that journalistic independence. They do not need to disclose payment as they should not accept any. They also do not require approval to share their findings, they are guided by the public interest and fact. In the influencer realm, influencers practice “brand journalism” which is disclosed to their audience and approved of by the brand. Finally, marketers do not disclose sources of information, but they control the message through full approval. Public Relations therefore becomes a bridge (brand to influencers) and a buffer (journalists to brand).

*Influencer relations... It is not something you can hand off.*

Where does influencer relations fit within the current ecology of roles within communication departments or should it be a new and distinct role? Results showed 70% (n=7) think that influencer relations as a role should be a

speciality within a brands communication team, while 30% felt that using an agency to manage influencer relations was the better way. By isolating the influencers' responses, however, we see a strong preference emerge: from their perspective, 80% (n=4) prefer to work with brands who have internal influencer relations teams to those who employ an agency. Wallace highlighted briefing and feedback as reasons why the job sitting with an internal person is better:

I think the way it works best is when the relationship to the brand is really tight... It is not just something you can hand-off. There are a couple reasons it doesn't work that way. One is that they (agencies) are not versed in 'what is the intent', they aren't looping back in and providing the feedback loop to the influencers. Also, then they're tends to be a very superficial treatment of it... I think you are much better bringing in a specialist and having them manage it in-house.

Influencer McNaughton talked about a partner who has brought the function into their team saying; "one brand in particular that I work with has a specialist within their communications department that deals with influencer relations. This is by far my favourite brand to work with because everything is seamless."

Amery reasoned brands who have influencer relations as internal specialty tend to foster long-term brand loyal relationships with influencers and benefit financially, saying:

I think brands should think about it as an internal specialty. And I've worked with a number of brands who do house their influencer relations internally. And I find that I have much longer relationships with those brands and a lot of the time they don't even have to pay me... the majority of experience I've had with in-house influencer relations means that they're getting a lot more bang for their buck.

In talking to both groups about the difference between internal and external influencer relations a trend emerged that showed two common workflows. Exhibit 4 demonstrates internal (ideal) vs. external (non-ideal) influencer relations workflow. In both cases it appears to be common practice by influencers at the mid/macro level employ an agent to vet opportunities, manage contracts, and monitor conflicts of interest. Rosilio, who works as an agent, talked about her role in the workflow:

As an agent my biggest role was always to vet what the opportunity was against the influencer's brand I'm representing. Every one of these

channels or people are what I consider brands in-and-of themselves. They've spent a lot of time creating their own personal brands and they have a lot at stake.

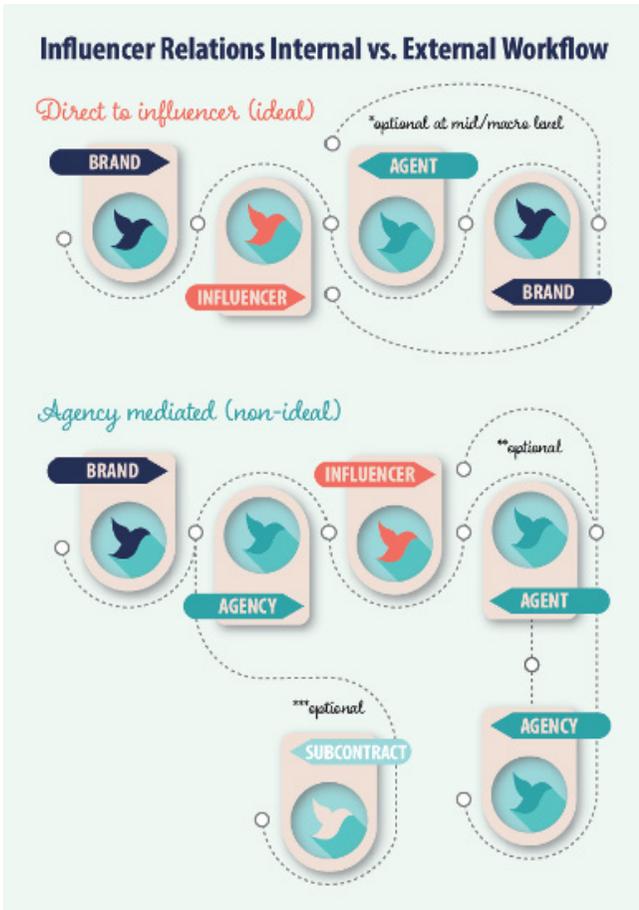
Subcontracting is seldom discussed, but is practiced by some agencies to who claim to do influencer relations. Maier, a communicator and former influencer who worked as a sub-contracted specialist for a number of years in this area discussed the knowledge gap she experienced from agencies who take on influencer relations capacities:

I would say my biggest frustration as an influencer and also servicing agencies as their influencer person was they would say this was an internal service and then they would outsource it due to their lack of understanding of the importance and the value of what the influencer brings to the table. They were much more driven to support a client's need to control things then they were the creative freedom of an influencer.

Ward, who runs an influencer talent agency, confirmed this practice, saying: "Right now, 70% of our business comes through PR agencies. So brands are actually diluting their budgets because they are paying PR agencies who are then coming to talent managers to do this." Ward, however, champions the idea of having an Agency of Record (AOR) for influencer relations, saying; "I see it as being another category that brands would have an AOR for influencer relations; as they would have an AOR for a digital firm; an AOR for a direct marketing firm." Mullins, who manages influencer strategy at a brand internally, noted that she sees a need for an agency as Ward has outlined, as there is a human resource shortfall:

I think it's important for an organization to have somebody on staff that understands the space because it just it gives you insights as to what works what doesn't work. But I think execution and helping with a strategy and outreach of the day-to-day management... I think it is important to have external help.

Exhibit 4: Influencer Relations Internal vs. External Workflow



### *Influencer relations... Who does what?*

The next area of inquiry looked to find a set of best practices for the influencer-communicator relationship and determine who is currently responsible for what. Participants were asked what their typical deal-to-delivery looks like from their vantage point. They were also asked to outline the respective responsibilities of the influencer and the partner. Analysis of their individual responses revealed a current workflow pattern made up of 12 distinct phases. The hope is this may be useful as a critical path that should be understood on both sides in order for any sponsored content program to run effectively.

# The 12 Phases of Effective Influencer Relations

## *Phase 1: Influencer Program*

**“I would love to get to a place where every brand sends a brief.”  
- Kate Wallace**

The first phase of any influencer campaign starts with either the AOR or the brand identifying an influencer program as part of the strategic communication plan. In this phase three key actions take place: objectives, budget, and brief.

Mullins, an internal Digital Marketing Manager, talked about how she starts her process. “First we decide: is it a campaign-based program? or is it always on? Then what happens is once we decide, what’s our budget? Then I’ll work with the agency to figure out what that program could look like.” Ward talked about the process of fielding a request for an influencer program from a brand: “If the job comes in directly from the brand, we ask them a ton of questions about who they are going after. The more information we have about their target consumer the better we can do our job. Then budget, framework, timeline.”

The importance of the brief, for both the AOR and influencer, cannot be underestimated. The success of an influencer campaign is based on the objectives and vision being clearly articulated by the brand at this phase. As influencer and former communications professional Wallace said: “I would love to get to a place where every brand sends a brief. That’s my preference - to see one. There are lots of the brands I work with ongoing, who do that.”

## *Phase 2: Influencer Roster*

**“We go through a bit of an investigation process.” - Emily Ward**

The second phase is creating an influencer roster. This phase includes three key actions: research (on influencers), creating a roster (for approval), and gaining brand approval (on the roster).

Influencer agent Rosilio talked about the importance of brands doing their research on influencers at this stage, to ensure product-influencer fit:

"There were so many brands that didn't even know the influencers...They didn't understand the real integrity of the channel or the content." Influencer Wallace agrees brands need to do their research saying: "If someone reaches out to me I go cyber-stalk the brand and I hope they do the same." Influencer research can be quite a time-consuming process, but it pays off because you need to have the right people. Ward said: "It really does come down to having the right person, having communication with that person, that person being able to communicate effectively to their followership." The sample addressed using human vs. AI tools in selecting the roster. Tsourounis said: "I've used influencer marketing platforms. It can be a good first step, but I always do my own check. You can't rely on it totally to find your influencer group." Likewise, talent agent Ward talks about the importance of the human factor: "We go through a bit of an investigation process: the same way you might try and find the right journalist in a publication, we try to find the right talent... There is a whole layer of this business you can't rely on an algorithm to determine for you."

Research activities mentioned by the sample included: following the influencer for a period of time to get a sense of their voice/content, going through their feeds for category conflicts, looking for signs of fake users or evidence of buying users, and looking at their metrics like engagement and reach. Tsourounis says: "I make sure I do the background research...I think part of the service I am offering is the ability to create the campaign and select the influencers."

The next step is to get approval from the brand on which influencers to pursue. Maier talks about her strategy for this, saying: "I'll put a bunch of them forward, probably twice as many as are requested in the proposal, and the client will select whoever they want." In the same way a PR professional adds value through existing relationships with media, and influencer relations professional adds value through their own existing relationships. Tsourounis starts from her own preferred list, saying: "I will put together a list of suggested influencers. I have a roster, I like, and work with often. Depending on the client's needs I will suggest new people." Mullins on the brand side talks about receiving and approving the list: "The agency provides recommendations on our approach and some select names of influencers to potentially work with and then we vet those and decide this is who we want to go after."

### *Phase 3: Influencer Outreach*

#### **“My biggest goal is to be sincere.” – Eric Radford**

Phase three is influencer outreach, which involves three actions: e-mail pitch to influencers, influencer/agent evaluate for alignment, influencers response.

MacArthur, a macro influencer, talks about her approach to this phase: “they contact me by e-mail, they know they potentially want to do work together. Then we book a 1/2-hour call, and then they tell me a little bit more about their goals.” Maier, from a communicators perspective, confirms this process saying once an influencer campaign is signed off on: “I would reach out to a group of influencers beforehand and just say this is high level. ...I’m just pitching it at this point. Would this be something that you’d be interested in? And usually they’ll say what is required?” This appeared to be a very typical working process as the influencers look to get more information on the program being proposed. It is important at this phase to note influencers and agents are looking for alignment or fit. Influencer, Wallace says; “I normally ask why they are interested in us, if they haven’t said that. I want to know why they feel it is a fit with their brand.” Radford talks about needing to have a genuine affinity for the product: “My biggest goal is to be sincere...I need to believe in the products, like them, and use them.” Ward, Radford’s talent agent, talks about her golden rule: “The influencer first and foremost has to have some ethics... if it is a product or service they are not interested in, that they don’t do the campaign.” This is necessary for the influencer to maintain their audience’s trust and needs to be understood by brands – they are not all going to say “yes” to your pitch.

### *Phase 4: Influencer Proposal*

#### **“I’ll pitch them a kind of a ‘menu’ of items.” – Amber MacArthur**

Phase four is the influencer proposal, where the influencer takes the information gleaned in phase 2 and 3 to put together a custom proposal for the brand. A proposal includes three parts: a menu of suggested execution items, high-level vision, and quote. MacArthur talks about her typical proposal saying; “I’ll pitch them what a long-term relationship will look like, kind of a menu of items. Usually we going through it together and pick what they

think is going to make the most sense for their audience “The proposals can be widely variable; no two are exactly alike.”

### *Phase 5: Proposal Approval*

**“Influencers know our audiences.” – Jill Amery**

Next, the client or agency refines or approves the influencer’s proposal. In this phase the brand will approve high-level concepts from the influencer, make changes, or suggest revisions. There will be agreement on number of posts, channels, platforms, timeline, and rates. Wallace talks about the proposal approval from an influencer perspective, saying: “They normally give me more information...I then go do some thinking about what that looks like for us. Timing, deliverables, rates, frequency, how it fits with our content schedule all that stuff.”

Amery stressed the need for the influencer to be part of the planning process and be given a seat at the creative table for this phase. “Influencers know our audience. So, every campaign has to be different and tailored to an audience, which is a lot more work upfront for the brand or the PR firm.” Amery is referring to the fact that each influencer will approach the creative differently. Rosilio talked about content approval as being a hands-off process, saying: “... the brand has to trust what the creators doing. The creator will find the best way to get the message across. It cannot be scripted ... You can’t have that much of a say and you have to be somewhat hands-off.”

### *Phase 6: Statement of Work*

**“We are very buttoned up when it comes to the legality of it.” – Jen Maier**

In phase six, the proposal becomes the basis for the legal contract, which is normally facilitated by the brand or agency commissioning the influencer. The final rate and negotiation of further terms, such as confidentiality and category exclusivity, take place at this phase. Of the contract process, influencer Amery says: “It always comes from the brand to me; if there’s something in there that is, [say], a non-compete period that’s too long or whatever, I’ll go back and try to change that. But typically, we’ve negotiated the parameters

beforehand.”

MacArthur talked about the importance of being careful and having a second set of eyes review the final contract: “one of the things that I’ve learned early on is to take the time and have a professional go through all of your contracts because I feel as though that has protected me a lot through this process.” Maier says that a contract protects everyone involved: “we have a legal document that’s been vetted by a lawyer... So, we are very buttoned up when it comes to the legality of it.” Because every influencer-brand relationship can have its own nuisances, Rosilio stressed the importance of having a contract in place: “Every agency, every brand is different and has different expectations and requirements. It’s always really clear that we have some form of contract or statement of work. It should be really clear what is expected of the influencer before anything gets created.”

### *Phase 7: Content Creation*

#### **“I want to do a good job and I want it to look good.” – Eric Radford**

Content creation is when the creative juices really start to flow. In this phase there should be sufficient time to do education with the influencer, the influencer shoots, edits, and writes captions. Tsourounis talked about the commissioning partners responsibility to ensure the influencer has what they need: “our responsibility is to ensure the influencer gets the key messages. Providing product is another big one. Finally, ensuring solid distribution and details on that.”

Next, the influencer prepares the creative. Influencer Amery identifies that her main responsibility as an influencer is production of “the highest quality writing, photography, and video that you can produce given the budget.” Radford echoed this, saying: “My responsibility is putting together a good quality photo, I want to do a good job and I want it to look good.”

Influencers stressed the importance of not rushing the process and being respectful that they have a variety of demands on any given day. Wallace said: “It feels like sometimes it’s a push out, it’s a big hurry to get the content out... Sometimes you are in a time crunch and you just need it to happen but be open to having a dialogue.” MacArthur referred to respecting that the influencer has a lot going on: “You know, I think the most important thing in terms of the expectations from the people that I end up working with is just that there are reasonable in terms of understanding that I do a lot of different

things.” Amery offered her explanation to why she feels influencer often get brought in under tight timelines saying:

Traditionally, influencers are viewed as the bottom of the totem pole. This is where brands go wrong is that they view us as a way to check the social media box. It just can’t happen last minute like that. A media buy can’t what happened last minute and I don’t think effective influencer campaigns can happen last minute either.

The key takeaway for communicators here is that authentic content needs time. Communicators should build in time for trial and education when pitching an influencer program of any duration.

### *Phase 8: Content Approval*

#### **“It’s their content still.” – Michelle Mullins**

After the content has been created most influencers will send it for approval to the brand or agency. There are two types of approval: visual approvals and editorial approvals. When giving feedback to influencers, the influencer interviewees unanimously said, brands and agencies should not be too heavy-handed as creators have their own unique voices and know how to message to/with their audience.

Mullins expressed that the brand involvement at this stage should be limited: “It’s their content still. But you know, from a brand perspective it is more about the messaging and visually perfect placement.” Mullins is and exemplar on the brand side. She shows an understanding of openness to how the creator wants to get the message across to their audience. She is doing a quality check of the content vs. editorial choices by the creator.

Wallace and the entire influencer participant sample shared stressful real-life moments about reviews gone bad, saying:

I certainly have had situations where I have 3, 4 revisions requested and at that point I say let’s take a pause and figure out a new approach. I don’t want to use your time this way. I find it is usually with companies who are doing it for the first time and they are not comfortable letting go of the narrative.

The bigger the following the higher the stakes. The influencer with the larg-

est following in this study, MacArthur, says that for her, reviews are about getting it right the first time: “There is always a review process involved in everything that I end up doing... I understand that both the brand and I would want to be especially diligent in making sure that there’s not a slip up.”

## *Phase 9: Posting Content*

### **“Timing and calendar are important.” – Amber MacArthur**

Following content creation, the influencers content goes live. Three major events take place: scheduling the content, posting the content, and sending links and screen shots to the client. Scheduling the content is negotiated based on direction from brand or agency and other content obligations by the influencer; sometimes, for larger projects with other dependencies, it is included in the contract. MacArthur talks about the importance of having a content calendar: “... timing and calendar are important because I don’t want to have too much sponsored content in my feed at the same time.”

Once the content is live, influencer need to ensure it is posted on specified date/time. Radford said: “The other responsibility is schedule. If they want it on a certain date it’s my responsibility to make sure it’s on time.” Wallace echoes this: “If someone gives me a timeline, I need to make sure I can adhere to that.” Communicator Tsourounis expects deadlines to be adhered to by the influencers she works with: “depending on the influencer, some are really good, I would say a lot of them are overwhelmed and disorganized. Promptness is a big one. If they miss a deadline, that annoys me.”

After the content goes live, the influencers are responsible for either alerting or sending screen shots and links as soon as possible to the commissioning partner. Maier says: “It would be up to me or my people to track that everything went live to take screenshots of it or links... send it to the client, make sure everything’s cool there, make sure we’re hitting targets.” This should take place shortly after posting with close monitoring by the brand and influencer for the first 24 hours.

## *Phase 10: Content Interaction*

### **“Share all of our posts on their networks.” - Christine McNaughton**

In the first 24 hours after content is posted the influencer monitors and interacts with audience comments, the brand should interact and ideally share content on their channels, and influencers or brand - depending on the objective of the campaign, and depending on the stipulations of the contract - might pay to use the post as a social media advertisement.

The first line of defence for the brand is the influencer. If there are questions, they can and should respond on behalf of the brand. Having a FAQ section included in the brief to make this process seamless for the influencer, or the brand contact needs to be on-call to answer questions, or a private chat or group to inform influencers about company news and messaging. Amery talked about dealing with a social media storm and how important having an attentive influencer relations person is in this situation: “by the time the communication lags happen there’s a new storm to weather and I’m left hanging out on a limb not having been able to appropriately respond.” In contrast, Amery shared her positive experience of a brand having a direct link to their influencers. Amery said:

I’m a brand ambassador for Beaches Resorts and Sandals Resorts. We have a private Facebook group where we can communicate different ideas and things. And recently Beaches announced that it was shutting down its Turks and Caicos location for a couple different periods in time. And this came out in the news but immediately... Beaches was able to communicate with all of us who were part of that group. The reasoning, the situation, the future plans, and all of a sudden 60 or 70 of us were able to share with our communities. The real messaging.

There is not conclusive evidence as part of this study what the best practices are, only a suggested way to help influencers lend their voices either proactively or reactively.

The second line of defense is the brand. The brand should not ignore the content created by the influencer; rather, they should interact with the content by giving it a share, like, or comment. McNaughton talked about this as being a responsibility brands, saying: “They almost always... share all of our posts on their networks. But there have been some brands who haven’t done that and to me that doesn’t make sense.” Rosilio encourages this practice of brands engaging or sharing the creators’ content: “They should take every

opportunity... They have different ways in which they can use the content that is created...It's an asset and they can use that asset wherever they want as negotiated."

Another way content interaction takes place is to turn the content into paid social or enact "boosting". Of this, Tsourounis says: "One thing we are doing now is we're boosting posts, so the client is putting paid behind the Instagram post. I coordinate that with the influencer, once the post goes live." Maier, a former influencer herself, was also positive about this practice: "I want to see that. I think that is good. I think they have to own that. What we are going to be doing now is make it a kind of a contract component." MacArthur, also agreed that boosting is becoming more commonplace, and pre-planned: "I have found most of the time I know before we even post anything if there is going to be a boost involved...So usually that happens out of the gate...usually it's planned." It is sensible for influencers to prefer boosting, and to prefer that the brand or agency pays for it. Boosting a post represents an investment that the brand is making in the influencer's brand equity, as well as the brand's own.

### *Phase 11: Post Reporting*

**"Be clear on what metrics you want monitored." – Kate Wallace**

After the campaign or at regular intervals the influencer provides the brand or agency with reports on metrics, screen grabs, feedback, and recommendations on future campaigns. These metrics must be decided upon before the campaign goes live, so that they can be monitored throughout and then measured and analyzed.

Mullins identified key metrics that are important to her: "Reach is very important, engagement rate is also something we track. Qualitative metrics would be things like sentiment of the commentary." Wallace stressed the importance of determining metrics beforehand: "Be clear on what metrics you want monitored. Sometimes I will find at the last minute or weeks later they will come back and say, 'we would really like to know XYZ.' I am like, I would really love to give that to you but I have already written your report and I have moved on."

A common gap identified by influencers was feedback on influencer performance, which brands often do not provide. Radford would appreciate more follow-up from the brand: "I am interested in that... I am like – well,

how did it go? I haven't heard anything." McNaughton confirms that there is often silence from the brand on results. "Normally, they will say thank-you for the report but then there is no feedback. Nothing substantial." Communicator, Ward talks about the challenges with attribution to influencer campaigns, which she identifies as the biggest reason return reporting is scant: "Successful brand launches are not because you have chosen one person, it is because you have chosen the successful mix of factors, and influencers are just one factor in that mix today."

### *Phase 12: Payment*

**"I like to pay as soon as I can." - Aly Tsourounis**

Phase 12 is to get everyone #paid for their #ad. The influencer invoices the brand or agency. Depending on who is leading the relationship, the brand or agency pays the influencer. In the contact payment schedules should be outlined. Often influencers request 50% upfront, although there is not a standard. It depends on the brand, influencer, and agent. Tsourounis suggests closing the loop with "prompt payment because you want to keep the relationship flowing. I like to pay as soon as I can."

## Discussion of Study and Influencer Logic Model

The results of this study are a snapshot of where the relationship between influencers and communicators, as of 2019. A theme that emerged was that this area has evolved rapidly in the last decade. Specifically since 2017, the scale and professionalism required of influencer campaigns has exploded. This has been driven by environmental factors such as a shrinking traditional media sector, pay-for-play specifically in lifestyle media, and at the same time a shift in audience behavior with audiences spending more time on SNSs.

This researcher finds that the results of this study demonstrate a need to address influencer programs as strategically as a media buy or a press release. This is not a fad – it is a long-term shift in brand-media relations, and many of the influencer participants specifically talked about brands who are investing in influencers for the long-term and have brought in-house a dedicated person or team to help manage it. These brands are laying groundwork that, this

study suggests, will pay off as the environmental pressures mentioned above continue to fragment traditional means of full-control marketing tactics.

To illustrate how quickly this area is shifting: a 2017 survey of marketers found that 87% employ an influencer-specific company to carry out influencer campaigns, and just 29% manage the influencer relations function in-house (Connick, 2018, p.10). This study found that although outsourcing may be normative, both communicators and influencers were strongly in favour of an in-house model. There are major benefits to investing in the function internally: the ability to build long-term relationships, the brands benefiting from the creators' ideas, and avoidance of the budget dilution that comes with hiring an agency.

The basic definition of influencer relations – “the liaison between a company and those considered to be influencers within the social media community” (Boone, Kurtz, Mackenzie, & Snow, 2016, p.112) – has become fairly well-accepted. The question as to how to manage this liaison well, however, is hardly settled, and this study has taken a deeper dive into investigating precisely this question. By synthesizing existing research and case-based investigation around the functional area within communication which influencer relations should occupy (public relations), what workflow internal vs. external is ideal (internal), and what the job of influencer relations entails (12 phases of influencer relations), this study aims to bring forth a set of effective best practices to inform the practice of influencer relations professionals and those around them.

## Conclusions

The results of this study suggest as well that the practice of influencer relations is most at home under the public relations umbrella. This shift from marketing-led to a function of public relations practice represents a blue-ocean shift (Kim and Mauborgne, 2017) as traditional earned media becomes more of a scarce resource, and their influence decreases, working with paid eWOMM is the next frontier.

In addition, this study suggests that the influencer relations role holds greater value and has longer term return on investment when the function is led by the brand. If a full-scale functional area of in-house influencer relations is not possible, the next best thing is to have someone lead the efforts internally and hire an agency of record that has a specialization in the area to help

with execution. This study found that fully outsourcing influencer relations is not ideal according to any of the stakeholders (brand, influencers, communicators or agents), especially by the influencer group who really prefer a tight relationship and a seat at the brand's creative table.

In the aim of creating a best-practice model for influencer relations, this study proposes a 12-phase critical path for effective influencer campaigns. The 12 phases are: (1) Influencer Program, (2) Influencer Roster, (3) Influencer Outreach, (4) Influencer Proposal, (5) Proposal Approval, (6) Statement of Work, (7) Content Creation, (8) Content Approval, (9) Posting Content, (10) Content Interaction, (11) Post Reporting, and (12) Payment.

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