



The Influencer Ecosystem

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Influencers have become an important part of the digital marketing landscape. Now, just as several financial brands are showing an interest, tough questions are being asked. Is influencer marketing ethical? Does it work? Does it make sense in a low-involvement category like financial? How can you deploy influencer generated content to boost your brand advocacy and overcome lack of trust for FS brands? At a recent Forum event, Members had an introduction to the influencer ecosystem.

By Jasmine Butler, The Financial Services Forum

What springs to mind when the term 'Influencer Marketing' is used? For many (myself included), the latest Love Island finalists Instagram Live-ing their upcoming make-up line is the first image to surface. It's not a medium that appears to be an immediate fit for businesses selling insurance products and pension funds – and even less B2B propositions.

Whilst nobody in their right mind would agree that a Love Island X Asset Manager collaboration on Snapchat is an inspired idea, we should have no doubt that influencer marketing is here to stay. Plus, as Malcolm Dunn, Head of Membership of The Financial Services Forum pointed out, it is impossible to ignore the audience reach and engagement levels that influencers command. With some boasting audiences of up to 100 million (PewDiePie - aka Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg, now has over 100m subscribers on YouTube!) traditional print media audiences are beginning to pale in comparison.

As Jack Morel-Paulo, Head of Influencer Strategy at Onalytica and Scott Guthrie, independent strategic influencer marketing consultant, went on to discuss, whilst, of course, regulatory and ROI questions must be approached, financial services marketers will be missing a trick if they don't – at the very least – adopt a view of how influencers may be changing their industry landscape.

In fact, perhaps influencers are already discussing your products on social – but is your business part of or even aware of the conversation? Industry figureheads and first-wave adopters such as Martin Lewis (Go-Compare.com) and pensions expert Henry Tapper (Pensions Playpen) have been gaining traction with social audiences for some time. Now, as more individuals become comfortable speaking out on social channels, we are seeing the rise of the micro-influencer - and the part-time blogger with a full-time financial services job, who just really hits the nail on the head with their LinkedIn posts.

Jack Morel-Paulo began his presentation by sharing a fascinating diagram of the influencer network within private banking and wealth management, demonstrating the 'reach' of each influencer by audience and collaboration with other influencers. Onalytica provide a platform that helps businesses to track key influencers in their market, as well as providing strategies for businesses to collaborate with influencers in a way that is both mutually beneficial and meets business objectives.

As part of an excellent overview of this new marketing concept for financial services (slides are available), Jack highlighted that one of the most important elements of working with an influencer was spending time getting to know them and understanding what their objectives are and what drives their audience engagement. This understanding shapes not only the type and medium of collaboration (i.e. with their background, would this influencer be the best fit for a panel discussion versus a guest blog post?) but the KPI and longer-term strategy.

Simply approaching an influencer with your own business goals is unlikely to reap positive results. Much like many marketing initiatives, a one-off product review with over-ambitious expectations of ROI – for

both the brand and the influencer - is bound to end in disappointment on both sides. Businesses should take time to map out their expectations for each project and how they will track success.

In Jack's experience, a failure to be upfront, both with internal audiences and with the influencer themselves, about what you are trying to achieve with the project often ends in disappointment from both sides. If you aren't yet clear on why you would like to collaborate with an influencer, continue to invest in tracking the social landscape and understand what conversations are happening, in turn gaining a better understanding of the experts in your sector and who you may approach later down the line.

Jack provided a clear guide for how to approach an influencer project, which he has shared with Members via his slide deck.

Former management consultant Scott Guthrie, previously worked on Procter and Gamble's global influencer marketing strategy and currently helps businesses to activate and plan social influencer campaigns, providing guidance in setting strategy and approaching influencers for collaboration. Scott provided the group with some real-life case studies from successful campaigns, most notably drawing on Direct Line's recent partnership with Alfie Deyes (partner of Zoella, and curator of 'The Pointless Blog' – for those in the know!).

Direct Line were looking to address the harrowing statistic that 17- to 19-year-olds make up 1.5% of UK licence holders but are responsible for 12% of fatal and serious crashes. Direct Line had three clear objectives for working with Alfie, which can be attributed to the success of the campaign:

1. Create a relevant brand ambassador for the Direct Line telematics product through engaging relatable content which resonates with key audience.
2. Increase brand recognition and establish Direct Line as a leading telematics provider.
3. Produce more policy quotes

Alfie was a great choice for Direct Line, not because he knew anything about insurance but because he was the target age, his audience were also the target age, he struggled with passing his driving test (and often appeared in his videos catching a lift from his girlfriend, Zoella) and he produced content that his audience loved. He was relevant, credible and authentic.

As part of the partnership, Direct Line provided Alfie with an intensive driving course and a year's free insurance, including a telematic box to track his driving. In return, Alfie blogged about his experience of learning to drive and over the course of a year, engaged his audience on the topics of road safety by providing content and anecdotes detailing his first year as a driver. He also discussed the benefits of using a telematic device and how it was helping to continuously improve his driving.

Echoing Jack's approach, Scott explained that the success of this campaign was not only attributable to building a mutually beneficial relationship with Alfie but having a clear and explicit understanding of his audience and how he engaged with them. As outlined, Direct Line were clear on the project objectives and outcome from their perspective. This in turn guided decisions on the frequency and medium of content (a long-term awareness project, or product review?) as well as what they were looking for from Alfie's audience (conversation around a topic? Or interaction with the brand itself?).

Both speakers agreed on a final word of caution: influencers with integrity and credibility do not want to be 'brought' by brands, and companies should appreciate this, bringing empathy and understanding of the influencer's personal objectives to the conversation instead. Yes, they will expect remuneration of some form for their time, but Jack mentioned that often it was an 'experience' – for example, an intensive driving course in the instance of Alfie Deyes – as opposed to a cash incentive.

Finally, audience is king, and influencers gain a following by building trust and demonstrating expertise over time, allocating their own personal resources to curating relevant and unique content. They are unlikely to want to jeopardise this relationship by becoming involved in a brand that does not align with their values.

As Scott added, this works the other way too. Brands should invest time into research and analysis of past content as well as getting to know the influencer and their values, as this could be crucial in avoiding potential PR disasters that could tarnish your brand down the line.

As some interesting questions from the audience demonstrated, the conversation around influencer marketing in financial services has only just begun. We can expect to see more financial services brands adopting influencer strategies, and it will be interesting to not only see who is getting it 'right', but how the concept unfolds within the B2B and intermediary spaces.

Thank you to our speakers, Scott Gurthrie and Jack Morel-Paulo for a fantastic event. Thank you also to our long-term supporters Mintel for hosting us and providing coffee and (as ever!) a great breakfast.