

Fledgling - still the best word to describe influencer marketing

By  Ryan McFadyen

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The best word to describe the state of influencer marketing in South Africa is 'fledgling'.



Image credit: Andy Holmes on Unsplash.

If we were to select an analogy closer to home, it would be 'teenager'; someone showing signs of maturity, promise and independence but just as often being unpredictable and unreliable.



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And that is why, while both budget for and reliance on influencer marketing is growing year-on-year, there is considerable uncertainty and hesitation when it comes to fulfilling adopting the medium as a critical component of brand-to-consumer communication.

Doubting effectiveness

The reluctance can be partly attributed to the normal evolution and growth pattern of any new medium or channel (moving from the 'new-and-experimental' phase into the 'established-and-trusted') but the possibility exists that the more logical cause is that the industry is largely led by tech entrepreneurs rather than marketing practitioners.

The priorities for these entrepreneurs have been turning a profit, scale and automation; priorities no one can really criticise. However, success in these three areas has been achieved by unintentionally sacrificing the integrity and perceived value of the industry itself.



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The historic behaviour of agencies and companies active in a new industry or within a new channel would be to come together to organise themselves and establish industry associations focusing on education, benchmarking and governance, which we attempted to do 10 years ago when influencer marketing was more word-of-mouth marketing.

These are outputs that are critical in establishing the channel as a solid, reliable, understood and used offering.



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Disruptive entrepreneurs aimed at building scale to take advantage of the global gold rush for influencer dollars have not prioritised this type of wisdom and this is why, 10 years down the line, there is still so much doubt and uncertainty about influencer marketing as a solid marketing tool.

Compounding the issue is the ambiguity around measurement and ROI of all digital channels. How can we truly ascertain effectiveness if we can't truly determine results? With 70% of advertising spend now being used on digital platforms; we would expect performance tracking to be hyper-accurate.

However, too many digital platforms bandy about unsubstantiated and unverified statistics, and there's considerable proof of past inflated or inaccurate numbers.

Fitting in

Another brake on the industry's adoption as a useful tool is uncertainty as to which of the disciplines should 'own' influencer marketing – digital, PR, general marketing or activations – or should it be an entity on its own?

While influencer marketing is a core component of what all brands now do, there are very few departments and roles that are built specifically to cater to this discipline.

There are no established and universally-agreed skill sets, knowledge, capabilities and experience for the industry – as you would have for PR, eventing, digital or any other discipline. This also means that there is no formal training or curriculum of skills to develop up-and-coming talent.

The industry is currently in a critical stage of its development. It is moving from the 'let's try it phase' into the 'it has to work' phase. This means that the next phase will be one or two options – 'that didn't work, let's forget about it' or 'that worked, let's

invest more in it'.



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My vision is for an industry that is professional and mature. Where there are ambiguity and confusion now, in a few years we will have data, detail and consensus. There will be a more practical sharpening of the methodologies, tools and outcomes as we continue to separate the pretenders from the performers.

This will cover areas such as measurement and ROI, identification, evaluating. It will be in how we use influencers within our integrated campaigns and how we value and pay based on performance.

In addition, there'll be better and more integrated use of influencers in campaigns, and they will be used with purpose – either not at all or centrally to the idea. Influencer marketing will continue to grow and will become more professional with influencers building themselves into media empires and brands themselves.



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And brands will start deal to directly with them as automation and professional services adapt.

There needs to be a more aligned and consolidated approach to influencer marketing to ensure we grow the integrity of the industry. And it can't just be from the brand or agencies' point of view – it needs to include that of influencers too.

ABOUT RYAN MCFADYEN

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