

Under The Influence

Once the realm of Madison Avenue suits, corporate advertising is now in the hands of social media influencers. Meet today's new brand ambassadors.

By Lexi Pandell

Getty Images / Vladyslav Bobuskyi

Grounded by a melancholy violin, the video begins with a man wearing a giraffe costume profoundly studying his reflection in the mirror. “Idiots. You can call us that,” begins a deep voice-over, “but if being an idiot can lead to greatness, then that’s a sacrifice worth making.” That greatness is captured when Giraffe Guy lands an acrobatic stunt on a trampoline, when another man pushes a wheelbarrow triumphantly past an arbitrary finish line, and when a woman, suited up in a Speedo, goggles, and swim cap, expertly dives from a folding lawn chair into a mound of snow.

In 2020, as lockdowns prohibited in-person advertising production, the orange-soda maker Fanta asked several internet influencers who had gone viral orchestrating ridiculous stunts to submit “hilariously dumb videos,” which the Coca-Cola brand then stitched together into an ad that rivaled the most compelling

The Problem:
Influencers are the future of social-media marketing—and many execs don’t know the first thing about them.

motivational footage (think Gatorade or Nike). Companies traditionally have spent millions on advertising campaigns created by clever copy chiefs and fussy art directors. Marketing, whether via billboards, magazine ads, radio spots, or television commercials, was a costly and fastidious

endeavor. Then came influencers—and all hell broke loose. Or did it? These completely independent brand ambassadors usually have little to no professional training, minimal oversight, and zero loyalty—a recipe for ruin. Yet experts say they’re proving to be more effective than some well-produced efforts, often at a fraction of the cost. Data collected by one influencer-marketing agency, Mediakix, shows that influencer campaigns are 11 times more effective than other digital ads, with returns of \$5.20 to \$6.50 for every dollar spent. And companies have taken notice, with the industry growing from \$1.7 billion five years ago to almost \$14 billion currently. That’s just a fraction of overall marketing budgets, but the gap is quickly shrinking. “Influencers are not really the new kid on the block anymore,” says Nancy Rothman, vice president of marketing at the influencer-marketing platform Sideqik, “but they are still in the gray area.” That’s because few execs understand exactly how it all works.

The obscurity has a name—the influencer effect—and has its roots

in celebrity endorsements and, of course, the Kardashians, causing many to dismiss the phenomenon as confined to fashion, makeup, and young women. But when the pandemic shut down many commercial productions and TikTok exploded on the scene, firms were forced to get creative in their efforts to reach consumers where they were—on social media. Automakers quite literally started handing over the

Why It Matters:
This is how many firms will connect with future generations, but they need to understand the risks.

keys by asking travel influencers to offroad their SUVs in rugged locales, posting Insta photos along the way. Electronics companies, meanwhile, launched ambassador programs that send free gadgets to YouTube tech

The Solution:
Learn who they are, how the influencer economy operates, and when the spend is worth it.

reviewers. “You’re getting other people to talk about your brand, in ways that you couldn’t, and on channels that aren’t natural for your brand,” says Corbett Drummey, cofounder and CEO of the influencer-marketing platform Popular Pays. Yet it’s a risky formula. Take, for instance, the time when some in the Twitch gaming community decided to use free giveaways from one soda company to make ads for a rival. “Brands are

definitely taking a gamble when they are asking nano- and micro-influencers to represent them,” says Texas A&M marketing professor Akshaya Sreenivasan, alluding to influencer tiers, which are based on follower size.

Still, with an enormous audience to tap into—Instagram and TikTok each have more than 1 billion users worldwide, and it’s projected that there will be more than 4 billion

people active on social media by 2025—influencers allow brands to reach a wider, more diverse customer base. Not only that: While the average person may never see themselves in a celebrity, influencers are accessible—and, even more crucial, aspirational. “Anybody can be an influencer,” says Rothman. “There’s good and bad to that.” *Briefings* gets to know a few of the renegades on the front lines of marketing. ▮



blackprints Follow

2,704 posts 123k followers

Nesrin Danan

Music + Lifestyle Photographer

Los Angeles

Corporate Partners: McDonald’s, Toyota, Revlon, Uber

“I was like, ‘It has to be Cheetos...’”

Nesrin Danan started posting photographs of concerts on Tumblr in high school, building up 80,000 followers before graduation. Then she migrated to Instagram. And in college, she learned about “swaps,” when a company gives influencers free experiences or products (like a cup of coffee) in exchange for a post on social media. “My first paid gig was literally like \$20,” she says, “but I was so

excited about it.” Danan, now 25, collaborates with major brands as both an influencer and a professional photographer, leveraging her social-media status to advance her career pursuits and vice versa. Her feed is a combination of images from shoots with Billboard-topping musicians like Megan Thee Stallion and G-Eazy as well as product promotions. “Brand deals pay so well,” she says. “It’s also

great to have connections with brands that I’m a really big fan of—and I only work with brands that I’m actually interested in.” That

includes Fortune 500 companies like McDonald’s, Toyota, Revlon, and Uber. These days firms usually reach out to her directly, but she also



Photos courtesy of Nesrin Danan



uses platforms such as Popular Pays.

In fact, last year, Popular Pays presented an opportunity to do a TV ad with Frito-Lay. With the pandemic lockdowns, they couldn't produce ads with a crew, so they sought visually skilled influencers to film themselves casually eating snacks—oh, and they needed it turned around in a few days. In the name of authenticity, she got to pick her snack of choice. "I was like, 'It has to be Cheetos,' because that is my favorite food," Danan says. She and a fellow photographer walked around her Los Angeles neighborhood with a bag



of Cheetos. "It probably took two hours total to film and do all the editing," she says. They sent the material off, and shortly after, Frito-Lay aired a TV ad featuring a brief clip of Danan munching on cheese puffs.

Danan also dips into content strategy, occasionally consulting with new brands looking to develop their Instagram accounts. She coordinates product shoots, advises on what hashtags to use, devises their

posting schedule, and more. Influencers, she says, can fill in gaps for marketing teams. "There are just some ground rules," she says of influencing. "And for people who don't know social media the way someone who's been on it since 2008 does, it can be really useful." For instance, she advises that companies beware of what trends they latch onto. "If a brand is trying to go along with a TikTok trend that has nothing to do with what they're doing? Then it looks like you're trying too hard and it looks kind of corny," Danan says. "You never want to be that brand."



Photos courtesy of Nesrin Danan; Getty Images / Aluxum

SHOW ME THE MONEY

Small-time influencers are happy to post in exchange for free products—but the bigger the reach, the higher the cost.

\$500K

Reported price for Selena Gomez to publish a picture of her sipping Coca-Cola on her socials.

\$300K-\$1M

Rate for a Kim Kardashian post, according to a 2019 lawsuit she filed against a fashion brand that used her image.

\$1M+

Cost of getting an endorsement from Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, the highest-paid celebrity influencer in 2020.

\$10M

How much the highest-paid YouTubers made in 2019 (half were gamers).



farmernick

Follow

1,178 posts

128k followers

Nick Cutsumpas

Plant Coach + Urban Farmer

LA | NYC

Corporate Partners: Allbirds, Nissan, Fiskars, Seedlip

"All of a sudden, you get all these emails from brands, and it's very overwhelming."

He's known as the "plant influencer." In addition to a stint as a reality TV star, Nick Cutsumpas is a plant coach—advising clients from New York to Los Angeles on caring for houseplants (yes, apparently that is a thing). And these days he can add business advisor and shareholder to his green province.

It started when Cutsumpas moved to New York City after college and began avidly collecting houseplants. He had only posted on Instagram socially, but his then-girlfriend suggested he devote his feed to imparting urban horticultural skills. "It really took off from there," the 29-year-old says. By mid-2020, he'd built a following of around 30,000. Then he was invited to be a contestant on the Netflix reality show *The Big*

Flower Fight, where foliage aficionados go head-to-head constructing enormous floral sculptures. "It was very much out of my wheelhouse," Cutsumpas says. Sure enough, he was eliminated in the third episode, but that didn't matter to his growing Insta audience—or eager sponsors. "All of a sudden, you get all these emails from brands, and it's very overwhelming, especially when growth happens fast," he says.

Before his career as a green-thumb celeb, Cutsumpas held corporate jobs for companies like IBM Watson and Thrive Global. "Developing those skills and learning how to build the messaging, the brand, and the mission was just so imperative to everything I'm doing right now," he says. That business acumen also

came in handy as he navigated his early partnership deals, when selectivity was key. As someone who

partners, Allbirds, labels each shoe with the carbon footprint required to make it. He has collaborated



Photos courtesy of Nick Cutsumpas

eats a plant-based diet and regularly posts sustainability tips, promoting consumption is a bit of a paradox. So he asks, "Which of these companies might be greenwashing versus really caring about the environment?" One of his major

with the gardening-tool company Fiskars, the organic mattress company Avocado, and the nonalcoholic-beverage company Seedlip. Nissan offered him a Leaf, their all-electric vehicle, to drive for free in exchange for posts about his experience.



Cutsumpas angles for long-term deals with contracts for multiple posts. “You’re able to... build a better relationship with the client, and— from just the pure monetary standpoint—achieve some bigger deals,” he says. And these days, he has an entire team to help: Creative Artists Agency manages his book and TV deals, while a smaller agency specializing in sustainability influencers handles his



social partnerships. The plant influencer’s social-media gig has proved to be a branch to other, perhaps more lucrative,

business arrangements. After testing out the hydroponic Lettuce Grow system, he reached out to the CEO. Cutsumpas

would create content for the start-up and take a role on their advisory team in exchange for equity in the company. “More and more influencers are thinking about how they can change their partnerships from a typical paid branded-content partnership to something that is actually more of an equity stake and becoming an advisor at some of these companies,” he says.



they need,” Schreiber says. As she pursued more brand deals, she sought advice from mentors, took classes on the ins and outs of the industry, and

subscription service. She regularly collaborates with Miga Swimwear, which designs swimsuits for people with disabilities, and Liquid I.V., an

around 3 percent; Schreiber boasts up to 12 percent). She has also had several videos go viral. Megan Reid, partnerships manager for the healthy snack maker LesserEvil, says nano- and micro-influencers—those with fewer than 50,000 followers—often generate more sales than some with bigger followings. “I’ll say nine times out of 10 it’s the micro-influencers that are really doing a great job of making those conversions,” she says.

it will take to write scripts, film, edit, and coordinate with brands. Still, she says, “I have a hard time saying I’m an influencer, because I get nervous that people think I’m just getting free stuff and taking pictures.”

Recently, the Seattle resident began posting about her pregnancy, which sparked a backlash from people who don’t think she should have a child because of her health condition. These types of controversies might spook some companies, while creating opportunities for others. “I know I’m probably a fascinating thing for people to watch—like Dr. Pimple Popper,” she says—“but I also feel like it’s helping a lot of people, too.”



watched YouTube tutorials on the influencer economy. A little more than a year later, she has worked with brands such as MeUndies and FabFitFun, a fashion

electrolyte company. It’s become nearly a full-time job. Schreiber has a modest following but relatively high engagement rates (the industry standard is

Like any new endeavor, there’s a learning curve. “You have to think about what resources you need,” Schreiber says. She may need to spend \$50 on a manicure for a shoot or purchase props. There’s also the time



alanababana Follow

839 posts 13.7k followers

Alana Schreiber

Mom-to-Be

Seattle

Corporate Partners: Tivity Health, MeUndies, FabFitFun, Miga Swimwear

“I have a hard time saying I’m an influencer, because I get nervous that people think I’m just getting free stuff and taking pictures.”

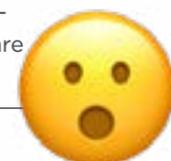
Like many people seeking entertainment during the early days of the lockdowns, Alana Schreiber took to TikTok, the short-form video social-media site that has gained more than 1 billion users in just several years of existence. Around

that same time, the 25-year-old was also diagnosed with gastroparesis, a condition that partially paralyzes the stomach. What began as a playful distraction turned into a real-time account of living with chronic illness. Schreiber started documenting

how she cleans her feeding tube, myth-busting common misconceptions (yes, she can go swimming), and showing off trendy clothing that accommodates her medical equipment. As strangers discovered her profile, she started answering questions.

The response was effusive. “People were just so positive,” she says. Tivity Health, an at-home STD testing company, was the first brand to reach out. They were a natural fit. “I wanted to share this for people who were not getting the proper care

Photos courtesy of Nick Cutsumpas, Alana Schreiber



SOCIAL STATUS

A breakdown of influencer tiers

MICRO 10,000–50,000 FOLLOWERS

Handle: @mommyweek **Following:** 12.9K Insta followers **Areas of influence:** parenting, health, lifestyle **Partners:** Lenovo, Invitae, J.Crew

MID 50,000–500,000 FOLLOWERS

Handle: @sharktoof **Following:** 129K Insta followers (his husky @loki has 2 million) **Areas of influence:** photography, outdoors, pets **Partners:** Lunazul Tequila, the film *Call of the Wild*, RVshare

MACRO 500,000–1 MILLION FOLLOWERS

Handle: @leendadong **Following:** 985K Insta followers, 15 million TikTok followers **Areas of influence:** comedy **Partners:** HBO, Korea Tourism Organization, Too Faced Cosmetics

MEGA 1 MILLION+ FOLLOWERS

Handle: @addisonrae **Following:** 38 million Insta followers, 80 million TikTok followers **Areas of influence:** fashion, acting, music **Partners:** American Eagle, Coca-Cola, Disney