

The journey from influencers to digital-first influencer marketing

By [Stephane Rogovsky](#)

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Using a famous face to promote a product goes back decades. From Honus Wagner for Louisville Slugger baseball bats to Oprah Winfrey and Weight Watchers to Michael Jordan for Nike to Charlize Theron for Dior - star power was and still is used to influence a consumer's perception of a brand.



Photo by [cottonbro](#) from [Pexels](#).

But the digital age is beginning to change just how that perception is manifested.

Previously, these celebrity endorsements were engineered by ad agencies and PR companies to give a brand exposure across billboards, TV and print in a market. These markets could be broad, George Clooney and Nespresso for example, or they could be quite specific, which led to some really interesting celebrity endorsements especially in the Asian markets. Like Matt leBlanc for Ichiban Lipstick for Men. In fact, if you want to see some really fun and different ads, search for Japanese ads featuring American celebrities. Schwarzenegger, Pitt, Clooney, Cage, Day-Lewis – you name the celebrity and they've probably done a very unusual Japanese ad.



Billboard George for Nespresso

12 Nov 2009



These big-budget (celebrities ain't cheap) campaigns were attention-catching and gave brands a face that audiences recognised and aspired to emulate.

Then social media exploded, and a new generation of celebrities and influencers was born.

New wave of influencers

These influencers were not always famous people. They were not recognised as celebrities, but they began to attract followers who saw value in what they were saying or doing. The most obvious examples would be the travel and fashion

influencers with their beautiful destinations and fashion and cosmetics. But there were others who began to change how influencers were seen: moms looking after households and kids, financial gurus speaking directly to investors, video gamers and their gameplay commentaries.

The rise of Twitter, Twitch, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok brought a new wave of influencers, and a lot of them were normal everyday folk.

This also led to an unexpected consequence. Accountability. Today's digital-savvy consumers have access to a plethora of information, from what influencers are doing to what they believe to the shenanigans they get up to behind the scenes. They know when an endorsement is not genuine, or when a celebrity is caught in a scandal, and it impacts on both their perception of the brand and their perception of the celebrity. One of the weirdest endorsements I have ever seen was Cristiano Ronaldo and Facial Fitness Pao – one of the world's most recognisable and ruggedly handsome faces promoting a mouth-based 'fitness' gadget for youthful smiles? Cheque banked, back to football.

But the digital age has pushed it beyond a lack of belief in an endorsement, it can lead to a very serious loss of credibility in a society where the real is actively searched out, where celebrities and politicians and news outlets are increasingly being held accountable for their words and actions.

Always under scrutiny

The actions of influencers, whether in their personal lives or when representing a brand, are always under scrutiny. We see the results of foolish behaviours from the likes of PewDiePie and Logan Paul, and the results of behaviour done for the right reasons but in the wrong way in the ridicule that was aimed at the celebrities doing the 'Imagine' song for Covid.

In the digital age, there is no hiding. If it's online, it's forever.



PewDiePie threatens to shut down YouTube channel

7 Dec 2016



Which is leading to a very interesting new direction for influencers themselves. This realisation of the scrutiny they are under, the permanence of their actions and the impact of their opinions are making them self-regulate to a far greater degree. And it's leading to a better, more real engagement with followers.

Followers don't judge an influencer for being paid to promote a product or brand, they just want the influencer to be transparent and not try to pretend or hide the fact. This, in turn, means that the influencer must know the brand and product, must have researched what they stand for and offer, and must be able to weave that into their own personal style to appeal to their audience and effectively monetise their channels. All with the understanding that they are responsible for the endorsement, that they need to demonstrate to their followers and that their endorsement is real.

Creating unique and real stories

For influencer marketing agencies, it is leading to a realisation from brands that they need to have experts that are managing these influencers, that are able to choose the right people for the brand, to sift through their background and make sure there are no hidden skeletons in the closet that could hurt the brand. To source the influencer with a real link to the brand who can create a real, empathic connection between themselves, their audience and the brand.

That, for me, is the biggest change from the origins of influencers, the ability to create unique and real stories from real people for real followers.

The digital age is what allows us to send the message out. The influencer is who the audience will identify with. But the result is why we do what we do – human connections.

ABOUT STEPHANE ROGOVSKY

Stephane Rogovsky is the founder and CEO of R-Squared. Stephane grew up in Belgium and lived in Switzerland, from where he travelled every month to Turkey before moving to South Africa in 2014. With 13 years in finance and senior management experience in a Swiss Private Bank, Stephane made a pivot into marketing in 2014 with the founding of R-Squared, a leading Influencer Marketing agency in Cape Town.

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