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Broaden your Reach using Influencers

The right choice gives clients a sense of inclusion

WANDA KENTON SMITH · APR 1, 2020

I've long practiced influencer marketing. I just didn't call it that. Prior to the digital era, I negotiated deals with celebrities to promote boating brands.

Shaquille O'Neal was basketball's rising star for the Orlando Magic when we featured him in Regal Boats' magazine ads and asked him to participate in an annual employee event. Burt Reynolds was starring in the prime-time television show *Evening Shade* when he flashed his pearly whites aboard our flagship Commodore, which was custom-painted garnet and gold with his signature Florida State University spear. We hosted a press conference that resulted in a national television segment on *Entertainment Tonight*, coupled with inclusion in hundreds of news and magazine articles in boating and mainstream media. Reynolds was a marketer's dream: a boater who happily promoted the brand, the product and the lifestyle.

Today, a whole new endorsement strategy is harnessing the star power of celebrities along with thousands of average Joes who have cultivated followings and earned the distinction of being an influencer — a person who can affect purchasing decisions through his or her authority, knowledge or niche audience.

Influencers are often segregated by categories, most notably by the numbers. Mega-influencers are A-listers, including movie or television stars, musicians and athletes with several million followers on at least one social platform. (Instagram is the platform of choice among influencers, with a 90 percent user ranking.)

Macro-influencers have followings of 40,000 to 1 million, and micro-influencers are ordinary folk and niche specialists with a following of 1,000 to 40,000. Nano- influencers claim fewer than 1,000 followers but wield strong influence within their specialized field, while savvy influencers strategically leverage social media platforms to build their reputation, cross-promoting posts with blogs, podcasts or YouTube links. Key opinion leaders are industry experts, journalists, academics or advisers.

The trick for marine marketers is to establish and/or maximize the reach of influencers. A lot of companies are doing this; at the first Current Awards, which the firm Social Navigator created to recognize the work of top market influencers, the contest drew 30 entries. Kristen Corssen, co-founder of Social Navigator (whose clients include Suzuki outboards), says influencer marketing activities should be integral to an overall marketing plan. Prospective influencers are expected to provide media kits that detail their following, past sponsorship experiences, fee structures, and explanations of how they track and measure results.

Corssen also recommends that companies pay reputable influencers instead of offering free products. "The best role the influencer can play is using your product in their everyday life," she says. "When a customer sees their favorite online star using a product, they are more inclined to purchase."

The National Marine Manufacturers Association and Discover Boating collaborate with marketing influencers through the use of Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. NMMA boat shows partner with local influencers to promote events, encourage ticket purchases and boost attendance, while Discover Boating collaborations focus on building a buzz for the boating lifestyle.

NMMA recommends defining influencer goals, budgets and target audiences. Looking to build more brand awareness, reach new audiences, increase website visits or sell a specific product? Develop a strategy that includes the use of trackable links so influencers can measure the traffic they drive to your site. Landing pages are recommended to maximize the user's site experience, along with unique discount codes to promote and track sales. An effective strategy includes hosting VIP influencer events or outings to create visuals and video while allowing the influencer to learn more about your brand.

When it comes to sourcing influencers, NMMA suggests researching social media hashtags and inquiring among agency or marketing contacts. Of utmost importance: aligning with an influencer who shares your company's core values and has a genuine affinity for the boating lifestyle.

NMMA's influencer costs have ranged from free to thousands of dollars. A common influencer compensation is one cent per follower, or \$1,000 per 100,000 followers.

Malibu Boats has professional staff athletes and ambassadors in its influencer ranks. According to Malibu and Axis marketing manager Bryant Thomas, influencer roles include appearances at the factory, regional events and corporate meetings, along with active participation in social media content. Malibu tracks boats sold directly from influencer leads, as well as social analytics taken from the influencer's channels and its own channels.

"The key to a great ambassador-influencer relationship is to find partners that are authentic, fit your brand and are professional," Thomas says. "It's best to take things slowly and build value into the equation for both parties so that things grow at a natural pace."

Stephanie Vatalaro, senior vice president of marketing and communications for the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation, says her organization launched influencer marketing in 2016 to support its "Take Me Fishing" consumer campaign. Its target audience was multicultural outdoor families with kids 6 to 12 years old. Family influencers were hosted on boating and fishing trips. Influencers created content that was promoted on RBFF's digital properties, as well as on the influencer's social media platforms.

"The greatest value we've seen by working with influencers is having our key messages delivered in an authentic way to our audiences," Vatalaro says. "We have had an increase of qualitative consumers visiting our website to register a boat and get a fishing license, along with an increase in our following across social media channels, including engagement with our boating and fishing stories."

Vatalaro reviews prospective influencers based on their followings, as well as their ability to edit video, produce high-quality and engaging content, and deliver beautiful imagery. When possible, she negotiates a buyout of content so she can repurpose it across multiple communication channels.

RBFF's best practices include preparing a contract that identifies all deliverables, selecting influencers with different skill sets to produce a variety of content, choosing specific visuals for different channels, and geo-localizing, which means using local micro-influencers to penetrate a more targeted audience. RBFF's influencer investment ranges from paid travel expenses to contracts of \$10,000 to \$30,000.

A common mistake when working with influencers is trying to micromanage or control content. Vatalaro says it's better to brief the influencer on key messaging while avoiding script-writing. To be credible, influencers need their own voice and tone to tell the story.

One of RBFF's influencers is @GaleForce Twins. Emily and Amanda Gale are 24-year-old twins who have been anglers since childhood. They took summer jobs during college, working on charter boats in Key West, Fla. Both earned their captain's licenses three years ago, and they bought their own charter boat a year later. At press time, @GaleForce Twins were micro-influencers with 13,089 followers on Facebook, 9,377 on Instagram, 1,564 subscribers on YouTube and 722 email subscribers.

"Companies should not only consider the influencer's following, but also their engagement," Amanda Gale says. "For example, do they have 50,000 followers but get 200 likes on a post ... or do they have 10,000 followers and get 500 likes? A good engagement rate is very important. Anything between 1 percent and 3.5 percent is considered average to good. Anything above 6 percent is considered a very high rate. For example, Kim Kardashian has an engagement that is around 1.96 percent. Emily and I believe that we add value to our post, since our engagement rate is 7.24 percent."

The Gales also point to the benefits of partnering with influencers who have street cred. "We offer marine companies authentic forms of advertisement to real followers and people," Gale says. "We do this by keeping our social media accounts natural, by posting unfiltered, unedited content that is about the sport of fishing and not just about the 'looks' of fishing.

"We won't promote a product we don't believe in," she adds. "For example, we won't promote a bikini line. We were once asked to promote an underwater drone for fishing, but it became apparent that the product was not best for fishing. We gave our honest feedback and parted ways."

With sufficient research and strategy, there is tremendous potential for marine brands to leverage influencers.

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