



Influence Your Influencers

Q: Your last column recommended putting a priority on influencers to spark word-of-mouth marketing. Can you explain more about how to use influencers?

A: Sure, let's start by clarifying who influencers are not. Influencers are not brand ambassadors. Brand ambassadors are usually customers or employees who love your brand and promote it to their friends. Brand ambassador programs powerfully engage existing brand fans inside and outside your company, and the authentic, often spontaneous support of your brand is extremely valuable. But a brand ambassador doesn't necessarily have a large following for you to gain broad exposure.

Influencers are also not members of your tribe. Marketing guru Seth Godin introduced the concept of tribes a few years back, explaining that a tribe is a group of people connected to one another, a leader, and an idea. Many brands function as tribe leaders and have attracted like-minded customers who follow them on social networks, participate in online and offline gatherings, and otherwise form a community around the brand. Sometimes tribes promote the brand to others, but usually they emphasize the connectedness and shared values among existing tribe members.

Finally, influencers are not celebrities or others whom you pay or otherwise compensate to endorse your brand. While paid endorsers can be incredibly influential, their involvement with your brand is a business agreement that usually costs a lot of money.

So who are influencers? They're people who have a greater-than-average reach or impact through word of mouth in a market that is relevant to your brand. In the book *The Influentials*, marketing experts Ed Keller and Jonathan Berry outline five influencer attributes:

- **Activists:** Influencers get involved with their communities, political movements, charities, etc.;
- **Connected:** Influencers have large social networks;
- **Impact:** Influencers are looked up to and trusted by others;
- **Active minds:** Influencers have multiple and diverse interests;
- **Trendsetters:** Influencers tend to be early adopters.

To identify your brand influencers, start by figuring out who influences your target customers. This involves doing some detective work that you can do online. Develop a simple list of keywords or search terms relevant to your brand and do searches on them to identify a broad list of potential influencers. You can also search on social networks and review sites to see who is sharing about your brand and relevant topics. A quick look at people's profiles can help you determine the size and nature of their sphere of influence. Also try looking for

bloggers who write about relevant topics by using Google Blog Search or Technorati, and use site traffic reporting services like Alexa or Quantcast to determine the size of their following. If you have a PR agency, they can use tools such as Vocus and Cision to find influencers.

From there, you can narrow down the field and prioritize people based on the criteria I listed. Once you've identified a pool of influencers, initiate a conversation with them about enrolling their help.

Keep in mind that influencers may not be fans of your brand—they might not even be aware of your brand if it's new. You need to inform and inspire them with brand information and insights that are relevant to the topics they are interested in. When health beverage brand Mamma Chia first launched, founder Janie Hoffman knew she would have to educate people and inspire them to try something very different. She personally manned sampling tables at Whole Foods stores to establish a level of intimacy with potential influencers. As she poured out samples, she enthusiastically told the story of the chia seed and why it was important. And she chose messaging for her product labels like "Seed your soul," which intrigued influencers through a mind-body connection.

Be transparent about your intentions. It's OK to be clear that you are asking for influencers' help in spreading the word about your brand. Encourage them to be transparent with their friends and followers. Their telling others that you initially approached them not only helps them maintain their integrity, but it also increases their social currency. Powerade, for example, enrolled top teen athletes as influencers by mailing them a special box with a gift and coupon inside. By finding them and calling them out, Powerade signaled to these teens and to others that they were special. Another way to do this is to give your influencers a special name and badge for use on their social profiles.

Ensure you are offering a fair exchange of value. You want to show influencers your appreciation for their help and to support them and their efforts. Consider offering exclusive information or access to special channels that allow them to connect with your brand or the people in your organization. Getting the inside scoop and personal attention can be motivating. Also consider facilitating connections between influencers so you help them expand their networks. In addition, you may want to solicit their input and feedback on products, pending innovations, and upcoming news items.

Influencer programs are, by definition, long-term, multi-year commitments designed to build relationships. They require a plan and patience—and they pay out. 