



CISION®

AN INFLUENCE FRAMEWORK FOR PR

Influence is more than influencers



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INTRODUCTION

Earned media comes in many forms and there is more to influence than “influencers”, although they have come to dominate the conversation in the past few years. The bigger question for PR and comms professionals to address is: What is influence? If we know that, we can know why tapping an influencer for a particular project would be the right call – or if there’s a better approach to use.

WHAT IS INFLUENCE?

A good framework for influence comes from Dr. Robert Cialdini, who is widely regarded as the leading social scientist when it comes to the subject. (You can read an interview with him in [Harvard Business Review](#).)

He breaks down influence into the following principles:

1. Reciprocity
2. Consistency
3. Social Proof
4. Liking
5. Authority
6. Scarcity



Reciprocity works on the expectation that people are more likely to give something back to you that you give them first, whether that's a smile, or something of value like an offer of help or useful information.

For a comms professional working for a brand, this means that if you're offering valuable information to your target audience about something they want to learn about or a product to buy to improve their lives in some way, they're more likely to reciprocate. This could mean engaging in the brand community, inviting friends and family to join that community, giving feedback on a marketing strategy or product, or perhaps even buying that product.



Consistency in branding is important for so many reasons, but one we might not think about as much is its role in influence when it comes to our audience: People are more likely to be consistent with something they've publicly declared. If someone says out loud in front of others that they're going to do something they are much more likely to follow through.

Comms pros who encourage fans to declare their love of a brand in some public forum could see increased dedication to that brand. This can be done in a number of ways: By sending free swag and encouraging them to take selfies with it and tag the brand when they share the photo, by adding a branded badge to an avatar in a community, or any other number of creative ways to have fans and followers of a brand say they are a patron and supporter of it.



Social proof comes into play when people see other people like them actively engaging with and enjoying something – it makes them more likely to do the same.

PR and comms pros can tap into this by showing a target audience people like them who are already engaging with and enjoying a brand they're working with. One way to do this is by tapping an influencer or network of microinfluencers they identify with, but it's not the only way. Brands can also tap into UGC and spread those messages to other spaces where their target audience spends time.



It's no surprise that **liking** someone means we're more likely to say yes to them; that's why we help friends move or build a new flatpack bookshelf. And we tend to like people we have things in common with, or similar traits to.

If someone is not just familiar with a brand but has come to like them over time through genuine community engagement, they're much more likely to say yes to whatever the brand is asking them to do. One way to do this is to show target audiences how similar they are to the brand; one way brands are doing this is showing their values as part of their marketing approach.



Authority is an element of influence most of us are familiar with: We trust and are influenced by someone who is seen as an expert in a particular subject or industry.

PR and comms pros can work with a brand to get them seen as an authoritative voice in their industry in a number of ways: By putting out media that showcases their knowledge, tapping internal voices that are subject matter experts and amplifying those voices through owned and earned media as much as possible, or tapping influencers who are seen as authorities in the brand's industry.



Finally there is **scarcity**, which influences humans because we want to be part of something that is special because it is rare.

PR and comms pros regularly incur this tactic in inboxes, with exclusive invites to events or to participate in private communities, flash sales, and anything else that feels special. The key is to make the recipient feel like it is actually a limited-time, valuable offer and not a trick.

WHY THESE WORK – OR DON'T WORK

The key to invoking any of these elements of influence is making the use of them feel authentic. That's why just hiring an "influencer" who turns out to have 70k fake followers isn't going to make a brand an overnight success. If you do choose to tap an influencer, it needs to be a thoughtful match to the brand you're working with (and we'll go into more detail on how to do this in another section).

But in breaking down these principles of influence, it's clear that influencer marketing isn't your only option for persuading a brand's target audience that they should engage with them. The second key to success in influence? Don't focus on one element of it; use them all in the ways that make the most sense for the brand you're working with and the particular project or campaign you're working on.

Never use them disingenuously.

THE ETHICS OF INFLUENCE

We briefly mentioned the "influencer" who turns out to have fake followers and isn't so influential after all – that's not the only way to be unethical when it comes to influence. You never want to buy fake fans and followers for any brand account, of course, but you also don't want to fake authority on a subject related to a brand's industry by puffing up the credentials of someone in the C-Suite, or other internal source of information, for example.

Audiences do not like feeling like they've been tricked, and tapping into any of these principles in a way that isn't honest and thoughtful will absolutely backfire.





| WHAT YOU DO NEED TO KNOW ABOUT INFLUENCER MARKETING

Arguably as long as the general public has wanted to buy something because someone famous or important had it first, influencer marketing has existed. The current state of the industry is one solidifying itself from its nebulous beginnings and working to carve meaning out of the now-ubiquitous term “influencer”.

Coming back to the bigger umbrella of influence in general, journalists are often the most influential contacts PR pros have. The now stereotypical social media influencer might be the right fit for certain projects, but traditional pitches are still sent to journalists and editors. That, among many other factors, makes journalists influencers in their own right.

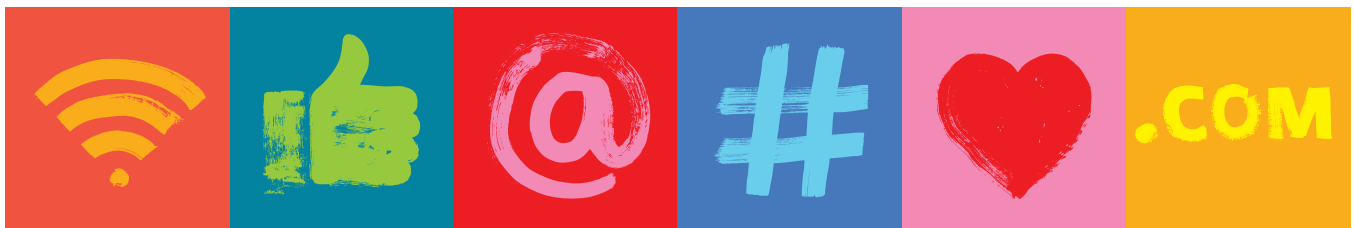
Another complication for PR pros when it comes to influencer marketing is that sometimes you’re managing influencer relationships and sometimes you’re not. Agencies in particular might have a designated employee or team who discovers and manages their clients’ relationship with these types of influencers. At Cision, we think it’s important to think about influencers more broadly, and that all people with influence are categorised as influencers. Again, journalists are proven influencers in their own right and the media is arguably the most impactful influencer of all. Whether intended or not, reporters and traditional media have significant influence, from providing product recommendations to reporting on an election.

Among many things, publicists are responsible for a brand’s reputation, which is why it’s important they consider all kinds of influencers – from traditional media to social media, and understand new and emerging types of influencers such as virtual influencers and platforms that are reshaping the influencer economy. Each serves their own purpose, but it’s still important publicists are involved in each relationship. How can you ensure you’re getting the right messaging across if a reporter is writing one thing about your brand, and a social media influencer is saying another? You have to be aligned with your marketing team and manage all aspects of influence to ensure consistent messaging.

I OUR TERMS (NO CONDITIONS, JUST DEFINITIONS)

- **Journalist:** A journalist publishes consistent and/or relevant earned media content through traditional news sources (newspapers/magazines/news websites/broadcast/radio). Included are also the teams surrounding a published journalist who help determine/prepare news for distribution (i.e. editors or producers).
- **Blogger:** Individuals who have material reach and resonance via a blog and produces content that is usually concentrated within a specific expertise or knowledge area, and often reflects a personal opinion/slant on the subject matter based on the author's personal experience.
- **Social influencers:** Here are the different types to know as of now
 - ◇ **Micro-Influencer:** Individuals that have fewer than 5,000 followers/audience members.
 - ◇ **Nanoinfluencer:** As you may have guessed this is even smaller than a micro-influencer and may in fact just be referred to as a regular person who happens to be the one their friends, family and colleagues turn to for recommendations. Basically they have a very small, but highly engaged following and this means they're seen as incredibly trustworthy.
 - ◇ **Virtual influencer:** Brands can spend real money to hire purposefully fake people to work with. The upside is that it's hard to get embroiled in scandal when you've only existed in pixel form for several months. The downside is knowing exactly how to navigate a relationship with someone who isn't even a real person.
 - ◇ **Pet influencer:** They're cute and fluffy and they have a large following, but does it make sense for your brand to work with an animal influencer? If it's not a natural fit but your team has a creative idea, these pets often have followings that rival the biggest human influencers.

A note: In our database we don't define whether or not a journalist or reporter is famous (i.e. Piers Morgan, Laura Kuenssberg).



HOW DO PLATFORMS FIT INTO THIS? WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THEM?

There isn't exactly a single most important platform to pay attention to when it comes to earned media since it can show up anywhere; in an online publication, a TV interview reposted to YouTube or another video platform, or in an Instagram post.

That means a savvy PR pro needs to be familiar with how earned media operates on all of these platforms—and also how influential principles operate there, since influencers of any kind can be the ones who are creating and sharing the earned media around the brands you're working with.

The important thing is to **know where your audience is active and wants to receive information from and about your brand**; that might be on Twitter or Instagram- in which case engaging a social media influencer would make sense- but it also might not. It might make more sense to work with a respected journalist in your field to place a piece in your audience's favourite publication.

Bonus: If influencers are a huge part of your comms strategy, you'll want to keep up with the changing influencer economy where now you can buy directly on platforms built just for that purpose. The more established social media platforms are adding features that allow for this too.





WORKING WITH AN INFLUENCER: FROM FINDING THEM TO EVERYTHING ELSE

The first and most important question to ask is: Why are you looking for an influencer? How will working with an influencer help the project you're working on? Ultimately you're trying to find the right person to help tell your story, in the right place at the right time.

Once you answer that question, the next one is: What kind of influencer do I need to source and vet for this project?

For PR and comms pros it will often be the right journalist to pitch a story or project to, but that could also mean reaching out to social media influencers or other types of influencers, depending on the scope of the project and the resources you're working with.

In some cases, it will make sense to work with both. Either way, you want to craft a personalised pitch that lets the journalist or other influencer know not only that you're familiar with their work, but why exactly you think they are the best fit for helping to tell this particular story.

HOW DO YOU FIND AN INFLUENCER?

Finding the right influencer to help tell your story can be a time-consuming process, but it's always worth it to get the right fit. While it's tempting to send out batches of press releases or other pitches to as many journalists as you have the contact information for, or mass DM a bunch of journalists or other influencers, you're least likely to get a good response that way.

If you're working within an industry you're familiar with, chances are you might already have an idea of who you need to contact and which platforms to reach out on. (Even better if you also already know how they like to be reached, such as by email and never DM.) If you don't, there are resources that can help you narrow down your contact list to the most pertinent, like the [Cision Media Database](#).

There's also software, such as [Cision Communications Cloud®](#), that can help identify influencers, from reporters to social influencers. It can tell you who's talking about what topics, people can be sorted by follower count and you can easily view biographical information and previous posts.

OUTREACH

As we mentioned earlier, you always want to send a personalised, targeted pitch to a journalist or any other kind of influencer you're hoping to work with. Let them know you're familiar with their past work and why they would be the perfect fit for the project you're pitching them now; especially if it's not immediately obvious but you've come up with a creative twist that makes it work.

Influential people usually like to be reached via email, but not always. Double-check any information you have to make sure it's current and you're not pitching someone via DM who prefers email or a journalist that has recently moved on to a different beat.



HOW TO VET THEM

(TO AVOID A CRISIS COMMS SITUATION OF YOUR OWN MAKING)

This is a step you absolutely do not want to skip, especially if you're entering a partnership deal with any kind of influential entity. While it's less likely that a scandal that comes up around a traditional journalist would taint a story they had written about your brand, it doesn't hurt to double-check someone's reputation before you begin working with them.

When it comes to social media influencers, there is no shortage of crisis comms examples from brands who didn't do their due diligence before they started working with someone and came to regret it when something unflattering- or even downright awful- from that influencer's past came to light.

Ask these questions before you begin working with an influencer (or even pitching them):

- Have they worked with other brands?
- If so, which brands?
- Do they have a conflict of interest in working with yours?
- What are their old social media posts like?
- What about old blog posts?
- Old articles written about them?
- Have they ever been in any legal trouble, domestically or abroad?
- Are they associated with any other influencers who have a questionable reputation?

If this seems like a lot of work, it is. But it's less work than redeeming your brand after a crisis comms situation that was entirely within your control to avoid by doing your due diligence before signing someone on to be associated with your brand.

WHAT YOU EACH NEED TO ESTABLISH BEFORE YOU BEGIN A PROJECT

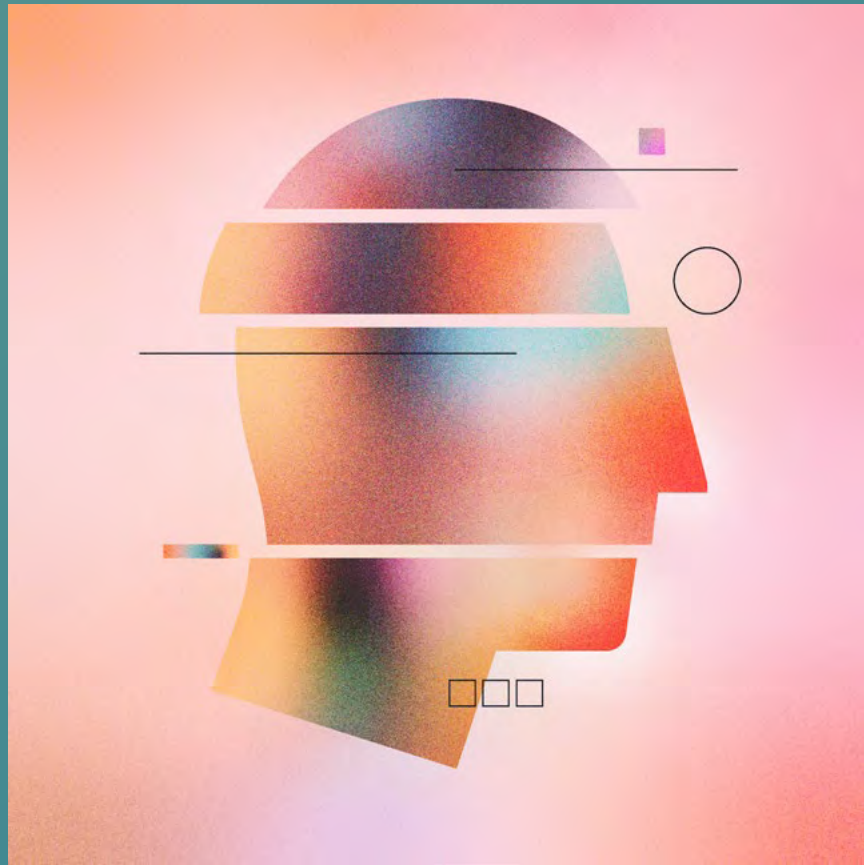
Before any project or partnership launches, you want to be sure both parties are absolutely clear on what is expected of them whether it's for a series of stories from a journalist or a series of social media posts from a social influencer.

Be sure you know what each of you is responsible for providing, within what timeframe:

- What you're providing to them
- The work they're expected to do (number of deliverables and what kind of deliverables those are)
- Who is responsible for reporting on metrics
- What those metrics are (what does success look like?)
- What is the timeframe for reporting (ideally throughout the campaign so you can adjust things if the numbers aren't what you expect)
- What does each party owe the other at the end of the campaign – a postmortem, final analytics, planning for another project or part of the campaign?
- Payment, when and based on what actions

You also want to be absolutely sure that all parties are adhering to industry regulations. That could mean following regulations for social media influencer posts- both from the brand and influencer side- or being sure you're not breaking any ethical standards or rules set by a publication.

The number one rule to follow? When in doubt, always disclose the nature of a relationship with an influential party.



Influence is many things and it's important to understand all aspects of it in order to tap into it most effectively. It's the journalist who has been tirelessly reporting on the latest gadgets for two decades on the tech beat. It's a wildlife photographer hoping the images she shares across the web on all platforms can help bring light to the issues the planet we all live on faces.

In the end, you're using the principles of influence to help tell a brand's story to the right people in the right place at the right time. Be sure to do it thoughtfully.



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