

Is influencer marketing a **busted flush?**



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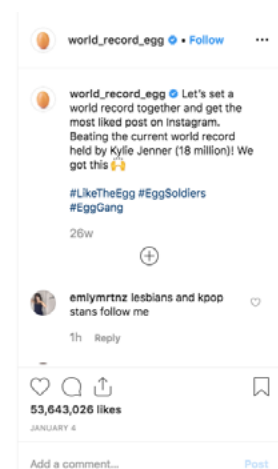
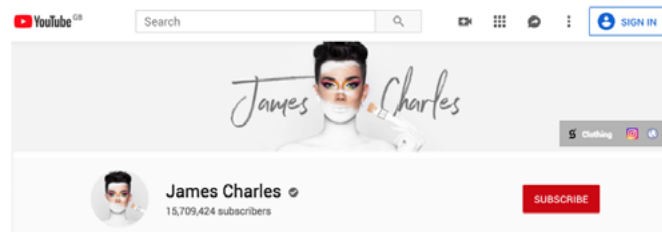


SUMMARY

For a while, social influencers were the apple of marketers' eyes. The rise of social platforms enabling individuals to have huge followings created new, shiny opportunities for marketers to promote products and amplify messages.

However, the influencer marketing gold rush happened so rapidly that there were very few standards or regulations in place to prevent disingenuous activity. As the sector has matured, there's been a backlash over fake follower counts, a lack of clarity over paid partnerships and influencers taking money to promote things they have no knowledge about.

This white paper will explore the issues which have begun to plague influencer marketing and whether the backlash from both audiences and marketers will fatally undermine the sector. It will also examine examples of influencer campaigns and explore how the discipline can evolve to regain the trust which is critical to its success.



INTRODUCTION

a busted flush.

[bus-ted flush]

noun

informal

A person or thing that fails to live up to early promise.

*Example: Brands thought influencer marketing would be a great way to communicate with their audiences, but too many problems led to it becoming a **busted flush**.*

Is that a fair description of influencer marketing? Perhaps not, but some communicators are beginning to question if influencer marketing is worth the money and effort.

In late 2017, [Cision launched a white paper](#) which implored communicators to harness the power of influencer marketing in 2018. Fast forward 18 months, and the discipline's reputation has taken a beating.

A series of scandals has left experts questioning the real value of social influencers and whether it's worthwhile for brands and agencies to use them, given the sums of money which are becoming the norm.

18 MONTHS AGO, WE SAID: “With new research from Twitter showing that people now trust influencers almost as much as their closest friends, there’s no question that influencer marketing is here to stay.”

Fast-forward to today and that’s certainly not the case. The trust which people put into social channels has drastically fallen. For example, [this year’s Edelman Trust Barometer](#) found that only **34%** of those surveyed trusted social media as a source. While much of this negative sentiment has been the result of *fake news*, the less reputable aspects of influencers and influencer marketing have also contributed to consumers’ falling trust in what they

see on social. Given that influencer marketing derives its value from authenticity, this hugely undermines the sector.

If a social influencer’s followers don’t believe a piece of content is authentic, then at the very least will tune out and stop engaging with content, at worst that audience will begin to desert them completely.

This erosion of trust threatens the effectiveness of influencer marketing. [A survey by Savvy Marketing for BBC Radio Four’s You and Yours programme](#) found that **71%** of shoppers did not trust product recommendations made by social media influencers.

Whether this is blowback from #ad labelling regulations or consumers becoming wiser to the discipline, the days of using influencers as a licence to print money for brands are over.



ALEX MYERS, Manifest founder and CEO, warned at a *PRWeek* influencer marketing event last September that if the current situation continues, the opportunities available from influencer marketing will cease to exist:



Brands need to understand their responsibility to safeguard both influencers and influencer marketing. If influencers keep offering their “influence” for money, then influencer marketing won’t exist in a short period of time.



WHAT'S GONE WRONG WITH INFLUENCER MARKETING?

SO, WHAT HAPPENED? How did the golden child end up on the naughty step?

While there have always been questions about the effectiveness and nature of influencer marketing, over the past 18 months two core issues have undermined perception of the sector.

The first, most serious, issue is that of fake or lapsed followers are inflating numbers. Given that brands, agencies and others who pay influencers are doing so to reach the number of followers on their profile, the fact that this number could be falsely inflated hugely undermines influencers' credibility, particularly as credibility and authenticity are supposed to be part of the sector's strengths. [A New York Times investigation](#) last year revealed the scale at which influencers and celebrities can buy fake followers.



Nearly 15% of Twitter's reported active users are believed to be automated accounts.

Secondly, there's now a perception – fair or unfair – that...

INFLUENCERS ARE HAPPY to promote anything if they are getting paid for it or are getting something for free.

This not only undermines their authenticity and loses consumer trust, it also reflects badly on the influencers themselves if something they are promoting is found to be wrong or fraudulent.

While these issues have always been present in the sector, marketers are now beginning to ask more questions about what they are paying for when they invest in influencer marketing.

This increased scrutiny has led to a range of stories which have highlighted murkier

aspects of the discipline. Some brands have begun to question the value of influencer marketing.

At the lower end of the scale, [luxury Dublin hotel The White Moose Café gained notoriety](#) after it banned social influencers from staying there, following a backlash to it publicising and rejecting a request from YouTuber Elle Derby for a free stay in exchange for exposure.

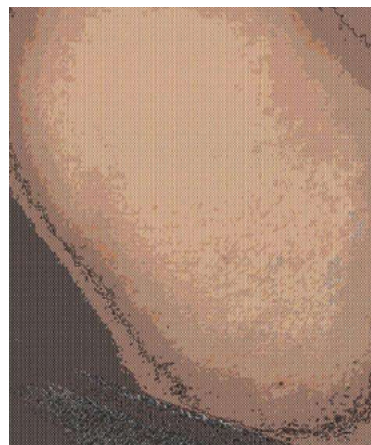
KEITH WEED, the recently retired Unilever CMO, raised questions on a much larger scale [at Cannes Lions 2018](#). He revealed that the conglomerate and its myriad of consumer goods brands would no longer work with influencers who bought followers.

He added that none of Unilever's brands would buy followers and said the company would prioritise partners who increased their transparency and worked to eradicate nefarious practices.

He urged other marketers to follow Unilever's lead, warning that the industry needed to take steps to rebuild trust "before it's gone forever".

After Weed's declaration, and moving away from brands, perhaps the most cutting take-down of the sector came from a *Marketing Week* columnist.

MARK RITSON decided to test both influencers' selection in what they would promote and the effectiveness of using influencer marketing by offering payment to influencers to [promote a photo of his backside, which he masqueraded as a new piece of art known as "The colour of influence"](#).



Not only was there take-up for this offer, but, by using industry studies, he argued that if you move beyond the madness that there were people out there willing to promote his bare backside, the rate of “influence” - where people take an action based on an influencer campaign - was **0.14%**.

However, what really took influencer marketing's travails beyond the marketing bubble were both Hulu and Netflix's behind-the-scenes documentaries on the Fyre Festival debacle, both released earlier this year.

The likes of Kendall Jenner and Bella Hadid, who were paid to promote the festival on their Instagram feeds, were criticised for taking money to promote something without asking more questions, and for which consequentially didn't exist. Hadid has since apologised for promoting Fyre, while Jenner has deleted her post recommending the event. The grey areas

which have existed around influencer marketing, particularly when it comes to identifying whether an influencer has been paid to post, led the Advertising Standards Authority and the Competition and Markets Authority to [jointly launch guidelines](#) to influencers which define what an advert is and how they should make clear to their audiences when they're being paid to post by a brand.

However, while disclosure should increase the trust between audiences and influencers, conversely it undermines the authenticity around that influencer's content, as audiences become more aware of the relationship between brands and influencers.

ALL THESE CHALLENGES have taken influencer marketing to a crossroads, where ethical issues and questionable ROI threaten to fatally weaken the discipline.

WHAT SUCCESSFUL INFLUENCER MARKETING LOOKS LIKE

Despite the threats to influencer marketing, the sector [is still estimated to be worth \\$10bn by next year](#). If there was absolutely no value or ROI in the discipline, brands and marketers alike would not be investing that sort of money.

Ironically, although the use of influencers around the Fyre Festival highlighted some of the issues around the sector, there can be no doubt that the influencer campaign used by Fyre's organisers had the desired effect on driving sign-ups to the event. This demonstrates that, for all its flaws, influencer marketing can be very effective, depending on what your objectives are and how you structure your campaign.

MOST BRANDS (including Fyre, as it turned out) don't have the money to pay vast sums to influencers with millions of followers for a big awareness shot, so must be selective with their campaigns.

An example of this was a collaborative effort between the Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM), Topman, W and Love Island's Chris Hughes. The activation capitalised on stereotypical influencer marketing campaigns to get cut-through and media attention, before then unveiling the real purpose of the campaign.



PR CASE STUDY: #DONTBOTTLEITUP

SUMMARY

Working at the heart of a multi-disciplinary inter-agency group, W helped launch the #DontBottleItUp campaign on World Mental Health Day with CALM, Topman, and Chris Hughes to show men it's okay to open up rather than suppress their emotions.

OBJECTIVES

The partnership between Chris Hughes, CALM, and Topman had the following mission:

- To drive fame and awareness of CALM and their core messages around opening up
- To engage as wide an audience as possible on World Mental Health Day using humour, talent and the power of the brand



STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Even though mental health is being talked about more and more in the media, suicide remains the biggest killer of men under 45 years old in the UK and **76%** of all suicides are male.

CALM's latest research showed that **84%** of men in the UK bottle up their emotions and this devastating stat was what the campaign needed to challenge: a masculinity that impedes men's ability to seek help when they're low or in crisis.

W knew that if it could create a compelling context, we would be able to supercharge the impact of our activity and help us cut through on World Mental Health Day.

So on 9 October, with BMB, W launched with a provocative debut of "L'eau de Chris" – a supposedly premium mineral water bottle infused with Chris's own tears; the agency confident that Hughes's celebrity status would effectively capture the attention of mainstream UK media and consumers. And it did.

For twenty-four hours celebrity culture went crazy – everyone was talking about it.

Twitter went wild. Media covered both the story, and the public's reaction to it.

Then, on World Mental Health Day at a press conference at Topman's office, with the spotlight firmly on Chris, he revealed that "L'eau de Chris" was actually "Ludicrous". He wasn't selling his own bottled tears at all.

THE TEAR-INFUSED WATER BOTTLE SYMBOLISED the disturbing research that **84%** of men bottle up their emotions on a daily basis. It was here that Chris was officially announced as CALM's newest ambassador and face of the #DontBottleItUp campaign, encouraging men to defy traditional norms of masculinity and talk openly about their emotions.



RESULTS

During the #DontBottleItUp campaign, traffic to the CALM website climbed by **485%** fuelled by **95%** new visitors and 18 times more 18-24 year olds visiting the site, showing the campaign succeeded in tackling a major barrier to addressing the issue – actually getting young men to talk about their problems and feelings.

In the days following the campaign, awareness that suicide is the biggest killer of

men under the age of 25 rose from **33%** in November 2016 to **41%** in November 2017. These powerful figures show that if men are able to ask for and seek help, hundreds of suicides could be prevented.

#DontBottleItUp delivered over 100 pieces of print, online and broadcast coverage, and had a total reach of over 3 billion across all social, OOH, digital display, and print channels.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING LOOK LIKE?

Given the challenges facing the influencer marketing sector, what will it look like in future? Charlie Bagley, digital director of Clarion Communications, presents his vision for the future of influencer marketing.



CHARLIE BAGLEY
Digital director, Clarion
Communications

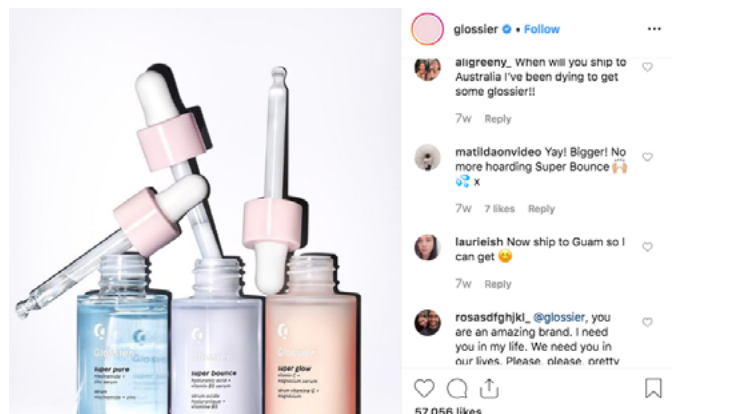
The future of influencer marketing is a shift to influencer relations, and brands with socially-driven purpose will win in the long run. In today's climate, with fake news (in many guises) at the centre of public consciousness, authenticity and trust must be foundational in all influencer marketing, and brand building in general.

Yet trust in influencer marketing is in the gutter. The Fyre Festival furore showed how easily empty recommendations can be transacted for huge financial gain; not news, but another public stain on the industry nonetheless. Brands now understand the 'one night stand' approach with influencers is no longer credible. Change is afoot. Keith Weed recently pledged Unilever would take 'urgent action' to end such transactional short-term relationships with influencers. Countless other brands - from Microsoft to Aston Martin - have made similar proclamations. The

shift in effect is one from reach to relationships. The old media buying mentality - essentially buying eyeballs - is being shelved in favour of engagement-driven benchmarks.

Brands are finally laying down foundations to treat influencer marketing as a social discipline in every sense; prizing relationships and judging success on conversations not exposure. With conversations the focus, it's brands with socially-driven purpose - something inherently conversational that goes beyond the core product or service offer - who will thrive.

TAKE GLOSSIER FOR EXAMPLE. Founded by a beauty blogger, the skincare and beauty brand has disrupted the category since conception in just 2014. Product and brand decisions are crowdsourced by a community Glossier has lasting relationships with. This deep audience understanding enables Glossier to deliver on its core purpose - being the beauty brand making people feel better not worse.



Everyone is treated as an influencer, from everyday consumers to celebrities and staff. These fiercely loyal band of advocates fuel the machine in return; Glossier already has more than 2 million Instagram followers – not bad for a brand born in the year of the Ice Bucket Challenge.

SHOE BRAND TOM'S is another brand effortlessly integrating long term influencer engagement into its social purpose. Also born in the social age, Tom's grew on a 'one for one' promise where pairs of shoes were donated for every pair sold.

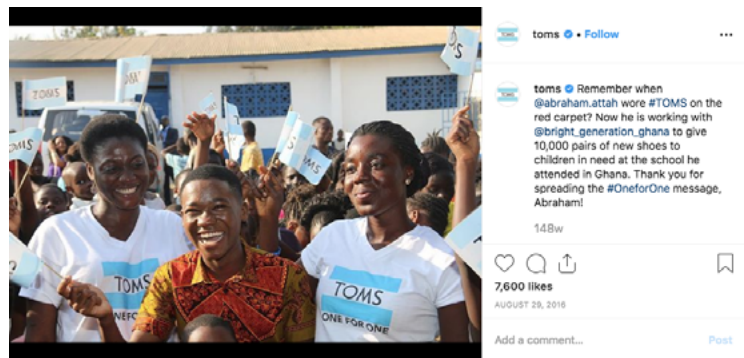
Doing social good has led to the formation of Tom's Tribe; a long-term programme engaging micro influencers around relevant causes, including fighting poverty and gun control. Influencers are unpaid, yet their impact is huge.

The highlight of its calendar, #OneDay-WithoutShoes, has driven \$60 million in donations worldwide, plus significant social conversation and global PR for Tom's (over

250 placements in 2018 alone). Glossier and Tom's demonstrate the power of authentic relationships and how to build them – namely with a long-term approach glued by socially-driven purpose; whether product or brand-led.

Brands able to seamlessly stitch influencers into the fabric of their business can take over the world.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING? It's a shift to influencer relations – where long-term relationships replenish authenticity and trust, and a brand's potential is only as high as the conversational power of its purpose.



FUTURE INFLUENCER MARKETING TACTICS

To reflect this shift from "influencer marketing" to "influencer relations", what are the tactics that comms professionals can use to their benefit when working with influencers?

LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS

As Bagley detailed, relationship building between organisations and influencers is a key factor in the growing maturity of influencer relations. While this seems like a logical tactic for brands, it's not been the case.



NIKI AND SAMMY, influencers and Radio 1 podcasters, revealed at last year's *PRWeek* influencer breakfast:



The view often taken by brands is 'get lots of bang for your buck and then get out'. There is always this view of 'here's your fee for now, it would be great to work with you in the future', but that never happens.



The fleeting nature of most brand relationships with influencers is part of the lack of authenticity which has enveloped the sector.





REBECCA HOLMES, social media director at Splendid Communications, predicts that the short-term product placement style partnerships will be replaced by better examples of brand storytelling which uses influencers:



Less product placement and more storytelling is needed.



“In general, many influencers have oversaturated their content with brand partnerships that are here today and gone tomorrow, and while it might raise awareness of product...does it shift the dial? Not in my opinion,” she added.



BARBARA WATSON, director of brand and content at Launch, agrees that targeting influencers for long term partnerships should be down to the suitability of the content they produce and the types of followers they have, rather than trying to take advantage of their number of followers:



Simple ‘payment for posts’ no longer cut it.



“Brands that execute influencer engagement well are now the ones that seek out influencers as credible partners and content creators. Engage with them because of the audience they speak to and the type of content they create resonates with the DNA of brand – not because of their vast digital reach.”

So, rather than feeds containing different sponsored posts and videos promoting a range of brands, expect influencers to begin working with certain brands more often and more organically.

✓ TRUSTING INFLUENCERS WITH CONTENT

If brands and influencers are to build longer-term working relationships, they need to be producing more organic content. Never mind that a paid post must be labelled as an ad or as sponsored, the types of posts used for partnerships is often jarring when compared with the rest of an influencer’s feed.

Understandably, brands want to exert some control over the content which is produced in their partnership with influencers. However, if influencer marketing is to “influence” people, partnerships and content must go together hand in glove. Influencers themselves are encouraging brands to be braver and allow them more control over the content they produce for their partnerships.



EM SHELDON, a lifestyle influencer, argues that brands should be open to collaboration, rather than dictating what she does:



I think the word ‘collaborative’ needs to actually mean ‘collaborative’.



“I get emails every day asking to collaborate but it’s so often one-sided. I think if we work together, the content is a lot better too and appeals to the influencers’ audience. After all, we know what works.”

Watson agrees, saying: “It’s got to be a two-way street, with brands and influencers working together to co-create content that is more credible, more meaningful and infinitely more buyable.”

As with most things, brands will get out what they put in when it comes to their work with influencers. Audiences are already beginning to scroll past posts where influencers have clearly been directed what to post and say by their brand partners.

By collaborating with influencers and giving them some direction, yet also allowing them freedom to create content themselves, brands will benefit from better engagement from these more authentic posts, in a similar way to earned media – and recommendations by people consumers know – driving better returns than advertising.

MICRO AND NANO INFLUENCERS

Brands have already begun to move towards using micro influencers with more defined audiences, rather than those with huge amounts of followers. This is down to both efficiency and cost, with brands paying far less to reach a much more targeted audience.

“I think a great example of the power of micro influencers can be seen in concentrated and highly engaged alternative diet communities such as vegans or those living gluten free,” says Holmes.

“These micro influencers are often highly motivating to their followers – driving recipe creation, purchase choices, and brand cut-through with highly targeted reach.”

As brands look to identify and build long-term partnerships, one option is to identify those even smaller than micro influencers

who have yet to break into the mainstream; nano influencers.



JO HUDSON, planning director at PrettyGreen, believes brands will look to cultivate relationships with influencers who are in the early stages of their social progression:



Firstly, remember that all influencers start out as micro influencers and the smart brands will simply spot these guys and join them on their journey.



She adds, “The industry will likely move from micro influencers to nano influencers – identifying progressive individuals, still with their day jobs, who have not yet broken through into the mainstream, but are very influential within their niche or community. Their reach is more personal and they will have the time and desire to engage more directly with their fans.”

If brands begin working with an influencer during their early stages, brand partnership content which previously jarred with other content in their feed will feel more authentic and engage their audience, rather than drive them away.



heesh.a

Follow

...

71 posts

3,106 followers

476 following

Heesh

Moroccan 🇲🇦 | London 🇬🇧

Sneakers & Travelling 🌍✈️

Nike UK 8.5/8

Adi UK 9/9.5

Micro influencers:

Typically an influencer with between 1k and 10k followers. Their audience is niche; for example focusing on Korean beauty products rather than beauty products in general.

Nano influencers:

Someone with a social following of fewer than 1k. Like micro influencers, they will have a particular niche.



charles_lux_

Follow

...

169 posts

199 followers

504 following

Deon Hayden

Catch me Live on Dose radio with fresh liquid vibes 🎧🔥

www.mixcloud.com/CharlesLux

BUILD YOUR OWN INFLUENCERS

There is an alternative to paying vast amounts of money on influencers or identifying them early on in their journey; create your own. As Bagley explained, brands are using employees or “superfans” who are fully engaged with their narrative to generate influence.

One such brand is *MoneySavingExpert*, which is establishing its cadre of writers as experts in their fields and deploying them across a range of media channels. Senior press officer Katie Watts explains the reasons for this strategy and the benefits it brings.



KATIE WATTS

**Senior press officer,
*MoneySavingExpert***

It's 2019 – social media has been around for more than a decade. Gone are the days when you'd read a story in a newspaper and then discuss it weeks later, when you happen to cross paths with a friend or pick up the phone to them. Now people share the original piece of content online instantly, and you see the content I shared with you exactly as I saw it.

For this reason, consumers are savvier. They are wiser to placed PR or paid influencer work. Add to that the ASA's and CMA's new regulations on transparency, and the result is that consumers lose trust that PR is genuine.

At MSE, we have built our own 'influencers' from the people within our editorial team – those who really do know their stuff.

They are the journalists, analysts and editors who day in and out are already helping consumers make sense of their finances. At the helm is consumer champion Martin Lewis, and we also have 10 other experts covering all categories, from banking and utilities, to reclaiming and complaining, to deals and hacks – even haggling.

Media training someone to become a spokesperson at MSE involves giving them the confidence to distil interest rates or complicated Ts and Cs into the key need-to-knows for consumers and most importantly, the action they need to take.

We invest time in briefing journalists and producers about who we are and what we can talk about. When an issue comes to light in the media – for us, that's usually when something goes wrong, e.g. cancelled flights – our experts are called upon to shed light on the situation. From there, they collect their own following from that programme or paper's audience and build trust with them the more they are called back for different stories. They become regular fixtures.

CREATING AN 'INFLUENCER' OFTEN RELIES ON CONSISTENT PR – the same faces are used for their specialist commentary on TV, radio, in print, online. Ours have regular 'how-to' slots on local radio. They are visible on our owned social media channels, particularly video. And we even include spokespeople messages on our own site content – be that a news story, blog or campaign – telling consumers the most important things they need to know.

Even case studies can be empowered to become influencers and advocates for your cause. It's absolutely possible to use the talent you already have to spread your messages rather than buying influencers – all it takes is a little media training.

CONCLUSION

As the influencer marketing sector matures and consumers become ever more resistant to inauthentic paid posts, comms professionals will be able to apply their media relations skills as the discipline becomes dependent on “influencer relations”, rather than simply throwing money at influencers.

By exploring options which maximise the authenticity of working with influencers, like developing long-term partnerships, giving influencers more control over their partner

content, identifying small influencers early and building up internal staff or fans as advocates, comms professionals can put their stamp on how to work with influencers. This will stop the sector from simply becoming another platform for advertising.

If both influencers and marketers fail to recognise the discontent displayed by consumers about influencer marketing’s growing lack of authenticity, its effectiveness and value for money will be hugely diminished.

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