

# B2B Influencer Relations

By Walter Jennings, Nov 2018

Building long term relationships with influential professionals is core to success in any business. The network of an individual or a company extends well beyond immediate colleagues or employees. Companies become intertwined with the communities where they have large operations. Professionals use their network to build new connections and gain new customers.

The mass adoption of social-connected platforms has created networks that span the world. This provides companies an opportunity to link into mass influencers and develop deeper, more meaningful relationships with them and their dedicated followers.



Influencer engagement leverages the power shift from the publishers to the public.

**“One of the most dramatic changes has been the transformation of communication from mass communication to mass self-communication, which has created a shift in the landscape of social and political change, by the process of disintermediation of the government and corporate controls over communication,”** wrote Alberto Lopez-Valenzuela in *‘The Connecting Leader: In the Age of Hyper-transparency, Interconnectivity and Media anarchy, How Corporate Leaders Connect Business with Society’*. **“Countless events—such as the Arab Spring of 2010, Brexit, the 2016 US Elections and the rise of populism in Europe in 2016—have all been supported by the cumulative and amplifying power of these networks.”**

The “connection effect” is leading to a fundamental restructuring of civilization, according to author Parag Khanna. In his book *“Connectography”* he argues on-line networks and alliances that transcend nation-state boundaries have grown in importance and power. Today influence and connections are more important than ever before – and are growing in power at a rapid rate.

## THE 1% RULE

Influencers are doubly important to cultivate given their role creating content. An often-studied principle is the 1% Rule, stating that only 1% of the users actively create new content, while the other 99% of the participants are simply readers and consumers of content. A 2014 peer-reviewed paper examined the 1% Rule in health-oriented online forums. The paper concluded that the 1% rule was consistent across the sites studied, with a handful of "Superusers" generating most of the content. Whether responsible for 1% or 20% of content, alternative theories and studies all show a concentration of content creation is in the hands of a minority of active, online influencers.

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## B2B Influencer Relations Continued

Against this backdrop companies are reconsidering their communications with an eye towards connecting and cooperating with active online influencers. The initiatives support long-term corporate reputation through the third-party validity conveyed by a well-respected and well-connected influencer. The advocacy of unbiased industry experts supports the company's own messages and materials.

Approaching and developing influencer relations for companies in business-to-business (B2B) requires a completely different approach than the high-profile celebrity endorsements sought by consumer brands.

"Digital influencer marketing found a natural fit with consumer brands, which pay or incentivize social media heavyweights to post content. That same formula doesn't work for B2B technology companies," said Jake Athey, Director of Marketing at Widen Enterprises. "An Instagram star won't drive customers to buy a \$30,000 platform by taking glitzy pictures with the user interface."

### As per Influencer 2.0 research on influencer marketing:

Early maturity on influencer marketing,

**71%** of Marketers see Influencer marketing as strategic

**24%** of marketers have an 'always on' program

**5%** have integrated influencer marketing into all their activities

Budgets on the rise,

**59%** of marketers are planning to increase their influencer marketing budgets over the next 12 months

Just **21%** plan to reduce this spending or keep it the same

Source: Why Influencer Marketing is the Next Big Thing - DCI

B2B influencer relations begins with a deep understanding of your target audiences and their interests, whether you're looking to reach potential customers, NGOs, government leaders, or local communities. Influencers connect with different audiences and are typically aligned via profession and/or interests. The availability of content across an endless array of subject areas allows companies to match their target audience with the subjects of greatest interest.

As example, an international shipping company may want to engage influencers who actively post on subjects including logistics, shipping, freight, supply chain, and others. Each term becomes a hashtag (#Shipping, #SupplyChain) that can be searched and traced back to popular, frequent writers on these subjects. Using data analytics, influencers can be refined and sorted by frequency of postings, audience size, language, or geography. This allows regional or in-country influencer relations activations.

**Most B2B influencers are already employed in the industry or related field. Each has a large and active presence online. Good sources for influencers can be:**

- Analysts
- Authors, experts and academics
- Business partners
- Industry event speakers and attendees
- Journalists
- Think tanks and government advisors
- Marquee customers
- NGOs and associations

Also look through your existing organisation for online advocates. Analyst relations, media affairs, trade associations, chambers of commerce, multinational member organisations all have some active online influencers – and you already have a relationship. Across the employee base there are online advocates (and detractors). Understand the social base of support already existing within your company today.

**Within these categories there are ways to evaluate the fit of an influencer and their likely impact. The three critical areas to examine are:**

- **Reach** – Primary and secondary audiences reached, including validation of actual subscribers, geographic reach and/or focus, language(s), occupation(s) of audience
- **Relevance** – Link to your businesses and primary audiences, and the segments you're looking to/are able to reach online, secondary relevance via geography, diversity, on-line promotion, adjacent expertise
- **Resonance** – Levels of engagement when posting – shares, comments, conversation with author. A Tweet in the dark means nothing. A post with lively interchange is rewarding for all parties.



Benefits of influencer marketing - Source: Influencer Marketing Study - Tomoson LLC

Not every influencer reaches 100,000+ people. Numbers have become less meaningful in a world of fake followers and paid-for likes. Stringent review of each influencer allows companies to develop relationships with people who have real sway with real people. Micro-influencers might reach 5,000 people or less. But if each of them is a decision-maker in your industry, that micro-influencer just became a VIP for your program.

Working across borders adds the complexity of local-language influencers. English language users account for 900+/- million online, followed by Mandarin at 700+/- million. Spanish is the third most popular language on-line with 300+/- million. Localising content and stories helps create better relations in every country, whether posting in Brazilian Portuguese or Thai.

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Where and how you engage with influencers will vary depending on the company structure, reach, markets, budget, and other factors. It is better to start with a small pool of people and build personal relationships than to adopt a mass-market outreach program. Connect with their content on-line. If you see they're attending a trade show, invite them to coffee while in town. Attend their expert network meet-ups or consider hosting one yourself.

The sales cycle in B2B can be slow. It's not every day someone purchases a US\$50,000 system upgrade or a multi-million-dollar supply agreement. B2B influencer relations takes a long-term commitment and will yield greater returns. Start slow, build and continue. Relationships can be ruined if programs begin without the support required to continue and build longer-term engagements. Like your suppliers, customers, associations, regulators and more, the key to successful communications is consistency and effort. Treat B2B influencers with the same respect shown other business-critical audiences.

## ***"Treat B2B influencers with the same respect shown other business-critical audiences."***

Above all, develop a long-term plan to engage on an ongoing basis with influencers. The investment in B2B influencer relations today will continue to pay dividends over the long term. In Asia Pacific only 55% of the population are connected online. A recent study led by Bain & Company forecasts 500 million additional internet users in the next three to five years in India alone. Building a B2B brand as a reliable, trustworthy and engaged partner with respected influencers helps project a solid corporate reputation.



### **About Tantalus' Influencer Relations Specialist Walter Jennings**

Walter Jennings is a Senior Consultant with The Tantalus Group, and the firm's leading expert on International Key Opinion Leaders and Influencer Relations for corporate reputation.

He developed and led the program globally as Vice President, Global Corporate Communications at Huawei Technologies in Shenzhen, China.

Based in Hong Kong he is an American-Australian with 25+ years' experience advising companies in China, Australia, and the United States.

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