ANA DRIVING GROWTH MEDIA

Influencer Marketing

Reducing Waste and Optimizing Investment

AUGUST 2026

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I. WHY INFLUENCER MARKETING

I've worked in and around influencer and creator-led marketing for nearly two decades. I have to admit, even writing that feels somewhat surreal.

When I started exploring the space, likely around 2007, we were in the era of food blogs, mom blogs, and niche communities built around shared passions. There were no influencer management platforms or sophisticated measurement tools, and I think it's safe to assume no early "influencers" were making the rounds at Cannes. What we did have were passionate people who had earned credibility with audiences around topics they genuinely cared about.

There was something special about those early brand and influencer collaborations. Brands gained access to authentic voices and communities they could not have reached on their own, while creators were able to introduce products, ideas, and experiences they genuinely believed would be valuable to their audiences. The exchange worked because it was rooted in trust.

As we know, much has changed. This work has become its own industry. It is more sophisticated, more commercialized, and significantly more complex than I could have imagined in 2007. Business models have evolved, technology has transformed how content is created and consumed, and yes, the creators have arrived at Cannes.

Yet despite all the changes, the foundations remain the same. **Deloitte found** that 77 percent of consumers follow creators because of a shared interest or a desire to learn something new. This is an important reminder that creator communities are not built around advertising. They are built around passion, curiosity, expertise, and a sense of belonging. At its heart, this is not too dissimilar from the work we did early on.

As media becomes more fragmented, people are experiencing passions and culture through increasingly personal pathways. Whether it's sports, wellness, beauty, gaming, parenting, food, or, in my case, anything related to cute dogs, we are finding connections through the interests we care about most and the algorithms that keep serving them to us. Our passions have always shaped where we spend our time, who we trust, and how we make decisions. Now, we build those connections with people we may not know personally, but with whom we feel a real sense of alignment or affinity. When you think about it, influencer marketing today actually mirrors some of the behaviors of original blogs, formed around niche communities. It gives brands a way to participate meaningfully in these communities. This is why investment in the space continues to look like a rocket ship.

And the most successful brands in this space are not only thinking about views, engagement, earned media value, or other performance metrics. They are asking how they can add value. Sometimes that means helping someone discover a product that solves a need. Sometimes it means providing education, inspiration, or entertainment. Sometimes it means helping people feel part of something larger than themselves. The common thread is relevance to you. The strongest creator partnerships succeed because they contribute something meaningful to the communities they serve. Even **McKinsey has noted** that the next era of brand building will be defined less by mass reach and more by the strength of the communities brands can build, participate in, and support.

I. WHY INFLUENCER MARKETING

That is an important shift. For decades, marketers focused on building audiences. Today, the challenge is building trust within communities, earned over time through consistency and value creation. I believe the future of influence will be measured by the strength of the communities behind it. And for those who remain focused on that fundamental truth, influencer marketing will continue to be one of the most powerful tools in the modern marketing mix.

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II. PROJECT BACKGROUND

This project had its origin in an ANA board of directors meeting. In that meeting, there was a discussion of current ANA initiatives focused on media. Those included cross media measurement, media sustainability, principal media, programmatic media, and retail media.

At the end of the discussion, ANA asked the board, “Are there other media issues that we should focus on?” A board member quickly responded, “Influencer marketing! Please do for influencer marketing what you did for programmatic media. That is, identify areas of waste and then ways for marketers to address those issues.” Thus began this project.

But unlike the **programmatic study, released in 2023**, there was no budget for outside consultants to help with the work. We needed to consider another approach and used an idea that preceded the release of our media transparency work in 2016.

- We built a “working group” of ANA client-side marketers who had interest in this issue.
- We identified a number of outside experts to help educate us.

The brief to those outside experts was simple: identify areas of waste in influencer marketing and then remedies to reduce that waste.

Between February 2025 and May 2026, we met with 10 subject matter experts, in this order:

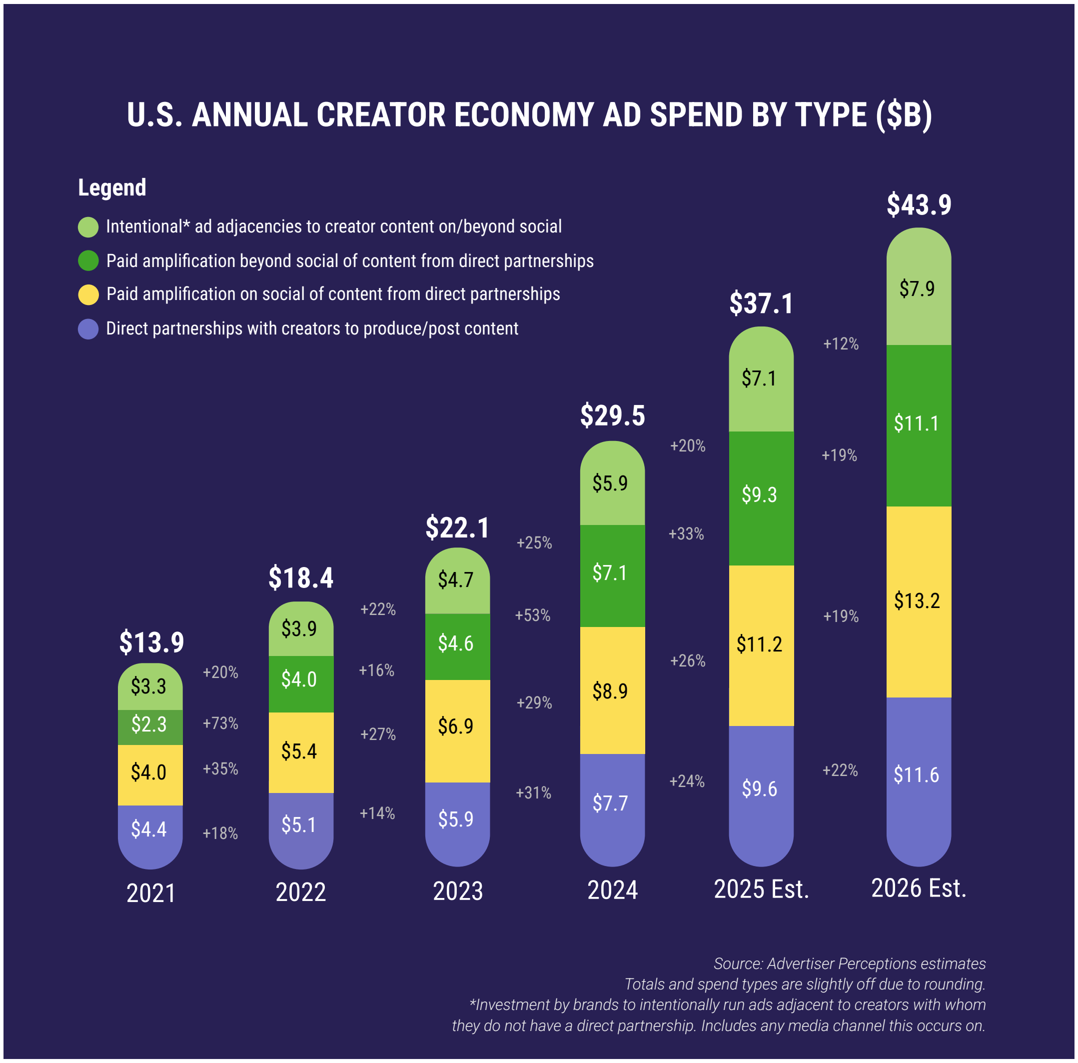
- Kroll, global financial and risk advisory firm
- mediasense, global media advisors
- APR, production consultancy
- Reed Smith, legal counsel
- Whalar Group, creator economy company
- CreatorIQ, influencer marketing technology platform
- Influential, influencer marketing agency, Publicis
- Scalable, media company focused on the creator economy
- EMARKETER, market research company
- Virzi Triplets, creators

Topics covered by these subject matter experts focused on the various steps in the influencer marketing process, including selecting influencers, vetting, briefing, governance/compliance, models for influencer management, content production, measurement, and more.

We also fielded a short survey to ANA client-side marketer members about the steps in the influencer marketing process — their importance, relative ease/difficulty, and where waste occurs.

II. PROJECT BACKGROUND

Influencer/creator marketing continues to grow. According to the IAB's "**2025 Creator Economy Ad Spend & Strategy Report**," U.S. creator ad spend was projected to grow 26 percent in 2025, nearly four times faster than the media industry's overall growth. Furthermore, 18 percent growth is expected in 2026.



Source: IAB

This is the second and primary deliverable from the working group. In February 2026, we released "**Influencer Marketing Agency Compensation — An Opportunity for Greater Transparency**." Highlights of that work are included here.

Finally, note that the terms "influencers" and "creators" are used interchangeably in this report.

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following provides topline learning about reducing waste and optimizing investment in the influencer marketing ecosystem.

1. Models for Influencer Management

Influencer management can become a significant source of waste, with inefficiencies stemming from the systems, partners, and processes used to manage creator relationships — both internally at the marketer as well as via external support from agencies and other providers.

Internally at the marketer, one of the most frequently discussed challenges is organizational fragmentation. As influencer marketing programs grow, responsibilities for creator activities often become distributed across multiple teams. One of the most frequently discussed opportunities involved centralizing creator intelligence to allow organizations to track creator relationships, performance history, compensation arrangements, audience characteristics, and prior campaign outcomes. Centralized visibility can help reduce duplication, improve negotiations, and support more informed creator decisions. Another source of inefficiency occurs when organizations attempt to scale influencer marketing without investing in operational infrastructure. Processes that may work effectively when managing a small number of creators can quickly become difficult to sustain as programs expand. Contracting, approvals, reporting, compliance monitoring, and creator communications can consume significant time and resources if appropriate systems are not in place.

Externally, the discussions highlighted the growing complexity of the influencer ecosystem and the increasing number of parties involved in creator partnerships. Marketers may work through multiple agencies, talent representatives, technology providers, creator management organizations, and production partners before ultimately reaching the creator. While these intermediaries can provide valuable expertise and operational support, each additional layer can introduce costs, reduce transparency, introduce conflicts of interest, and slow decision-making. The key take away is simple: The more layers, the higher risk of inefficiency, increased costs, and reduced transparency. There are parallels to programmatic media given the complexity and various intermediaries here.

2. Selecting Influencers

Selecting influencers affects campaign reach, audience relevance, content quality, engagement, cost, and ultimately return on investment. In the survey of ANA members, selecting influencers was rated as the undisputed most important step in the influencer marketing process and one of the most difficult, as well as having a high opportunity to eliminate waste and optimize investment.

Historically, influencer selection centered around audience size, with marketers gravitating toward creators with the largest followings. However, this approach can create significant inefficiencies when audience size is prioritized over audience relevance and alignment with campaign objectives. Creator selection today should focus less on follower count and more on the specific communities, interests, and audiences a creator serves. Selecting the right influencer should be about "fit over fame."

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As social platforms increasingly rely on algorithm-driven content discovery, a creator's ability to reach a relevant audience is often more important than the size of that audience. Creators should be discovered through a content-first lens, as the content captures attention from audiences.

A key principle is to align influencers to brand goals. Waste often occurs when marketers begin searching for creators before clearly defining campaign objectives. Without a clear understanding of what a campaign is intended to accomplish, marketers may struggle to identify the creators best positioned to deliver those outcomes, leading to inefficient investments and measurement challenges later in the process.

Finally, there is value in maintaining ongoing creator partnerships rather than relying exclusively on one-off engagements. Long-term relationships can improve efficiency by reducing onboarding time, limiting the need for repeated education and contract negotiations, and allowing creators to develop a stronger understanding of the brand and its objectives. Ongoing partnerships also provide marketers with richer performance data over time.

3. Vetting Influencers

Influencer vetting is all about risk — to prevent risk, mitigate risk, and manage risk. Brands need to know the people representing them. Approximately one-quarter of influencers reviewed through professional vetting services contain activity that warrants client attention.

Considerations when vetting influencers:

- Rather than evaluating each creator independently using different criteria, consistent evaluation processes allow for more objective comparisons. Establish corporate guardrails for choosing and vetting potential influencers and how you communicate that to your agencies and other partners.
- Vetting should combine technology and human judgment. Depending entirely on automated screening may lead to decisions based on incomplete assessments, creating unnecessary risk or causing potentially valuable creator partnerships to be overlooked.
- Audience fraud can be a concern. Organizations that fail to evaluate audience authenticity risk paying for reach and engagement that provide little business value.
- Allow time to conduct sufficient due diligence; do not move too quickly to secure creators if proper vetting has not been done.
- If keeping an influencer for a period of time, there should be a re-vetting or monitoring.
- Use independent vetting whenever possible to avoid superficial checks and conflicts of interest.

Vetting should be viewed as an investment to protect marketing spend, rather than a cost. Organizations that invest in robust vetting processes are generally better positioned to avoid costly mistakes while improving the quality and effectiveness of their creator partnerships.

4. Governance and Compliance

As creator programs expand and budgets grow, organizations face increasing pressure to establish governance and compliance processes that protect both the brand and the creators they work with.

Organizations that lack formal governance frameworks often find themselves addressing problems after they occur rather than preventing them in advance. Reputational issues, compliance violations, creator controversies, and contractual disputes can require significant time, money, and organizational attention to address.

One of the most common challenges is inconsistent compliance practices. Organizations benefit from creating standardized processes that can be applied consistently across campaigns to provide clear instructions to brands, agencies, and creators regarding disclosures, approvals, and regulatory expectations. Otherwise, misunderstandings can result, leading to additional reviews, content revisions, approval delays, and administrative work that could have been avoided. As one example, it is imperative that marketer briefings for creators include guidelines for Federal Trade Commission (FTC) compliance. Standardization improves efficiency, promotes consistency across teams, and reduces reliance on ad hoc decision-making.

5. Contracting Influencers

Contracts establish expectations regarding deliverables, timelines, content ownership, usage rights, compliance obligations, approval processes, compensation structures, and performance requirements. Many inefficiencies associated with influencer marketing can be traced back to poorly structured contracts and fee arrangements.

Before contract negotiations even begin, it's important to have internal alignment on the marketer side regarding deal terms and priorities. Without that alignment, organizations may find themselves revisiting decisions and renegotiating terms down the road after they have already lost leverage.

When engaging influencers, it is important for marketers to confirm whether they are members of SAG-AFTRA, and if so, be aware of SAG-AFTRA obligations. Those obligations may play a part in the overall engagement, including usage rights and payment of pension and health contributions. When managing influencer marketing campaigns, protect your brand by understanding these obligations and ensuring proper terms are incorporated into your influencer contracts.

One of the most frequently discussed sources of waste is the failure to secure appropriate content rights upfront. If organizations anticipate using creator content for paid media amplification or other usage, those rights should be negotiated upfront.

Exclusivity provisions can also be a potential source of inefficiency. Exclusivity should be considered when the role of the influencer will be associated with the brand for a long time. If exclusivity is required, consider limiting timeframes and be specific about brands versus broad categories.

Standardization of contract templates is another opportunity for efficiency. Organizations that frequently engage creators can improve efficiency by developing contractual frameworks that address common requirements while reducing repetitive negotiations. Commercial terms can be negotiated, but not the standard legal terms and conditions.

Most creators will require that allowlisting/boosting rights be expressly stated to allow a brand to amplify a post. Consider whether that's important from the start.

Finally, have a proper morals clause in your contract with the influencer to protect against questionable behavior or content unrelated to your partnership.

6. Influencer Compensation

Compensation structures vary considerably across the creator ecosystem, resulting in complexity for marketers. Without clear alignment between compensation structures and campaign objectives, organizations may struggle to evaluate performance or determine whether investments are generating appropriate value.

To avoid the inefficiency of negotiating with every influencer, create flat rate cards, especially for nano and micro influencers. Some marketers have peeled that away from the agencies recognizing that agency oversight is not needed there, generating further savings. Tie rate cards to clear and specific deliverables and timetables.

Virtually every influencer now is working with an agent, and those agents are representing multiple influencers. If you're engaging with multiple influencers from a specific talent agency, be aware of precedents you're setting with your deal terms.

Transparency emerged as a key area of concern. Marketers should seek visibility into creator compensation, agency fees, production costs, and other financial arrangements. Lack of transparency can make it challenging to evaluate efficiency, compare alternatives, and identify opportunities for optimization.

7. Briefing Influencers

Great work starts with a strong brief. A recurring theme throughout the working group discussions was the challenge of balancing structure and flexibility. Marketers understandably want to communicate key messages, protect brand interests, and establish campaign requirements. However, overly prescriptive briefing can be a significant source of waste, undermining the authenticity that makes creator content effective in the first place.

Internal alignment before creators receive briefs is important. Organizations can reduce delays and inefficiencies by ensuring that legal, compliance, media, agency, and brand stakeholders agree on campaign requirements before content development begins.

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Briefing creators too late in the process can create unnecessary pressure, leading to lower-quality content, increased revisions, and less effective partnerships. Similarly, treating briefing as a one-way communication process rather than a collaborative discussion can reduce the value creators bring to the relationship, limiting opportunity for creators to ask questions, offer feedback, or contribute strategic insights.

There was general consensus that a good brief provides the following direction: brand mentioned in audio, claim made, brand present in five seconds, close-up shot, hashtag included, call to action, and disclosure of the creator's relationship with the brand. Regarding the latter, it is imperative that briefing includes guidelines for FTC compliance.

8. Platform-Specific Content

One of the most common sources of waste discussed throughout the working group is the tendency to treat all platforms the same, developing a single creative asset and distributing that across multiple channels. While this approach may initially appear efficient from a production perspective, that often results in content that feels unnatural within platform environments and performs poorly relative to platform-native alternatives. Instead, platform-specific content strategies (based on briefs that are platform-native) reflect how audiences interact with creators in different environments.

9. Content Production

Content production has evolved significantly with the growth of influencer marketing. Historically, many creator partnerships involved relatively simple content formats, often produced independently by creators using limited resources. Today, creators are increasingly producing more sophisticated content across a growing range of formats. As creator marketing has developed, content production complexity has increased as well as the production requirements supporting those activities.

Content production can become a source of waste when marketers underestimate the resources, time, and coordination required to bring campaigns to life. Unlike traditional media placement, creator marketing often requires a customized production process for each creator partnership. Not every creator activation requires the same level of production support, and marketers should carefully evaluate where additional production resources are likely to create meaningful value. When scaling a program to dozens or hundreds of creators without upgrading the production infrastructure, minor inefficiencies will quickly compound into delayed timelines and bloated budgets.

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Important to consider:

- **Demand cost transparency.** Do not accept lump sums. Request full transparency on overall influencer costs, strictly broken out by talent fees versus production costs (as well as agency fees).
- **Establish ironclad production guidelines.** Every brand needs step-by-step production guidelines for onboarding creators and external partners. Because many influencers are relatively new to formal advertising compliance, these guidelines serve as a critical safety net.

10. Content Approval/Clearance

The approval process is a common source of inefficiency and waste, presenting opportunities to streamline. Influencer content often passes through multiple stakeholders before publication. It's crucial to define everyone's role in the process. Establish who is reviewing and clearing materials before they are posted, ensuring no clearance concerns arise. While oversight is important, excessive approval layers can slow campaign execution and reduce the timeliness of creator content.

Without clear ownership and alignment, organizations may expend significant time and resources managing internal complexity rather than focusing on campaign effectiveness.

Further, when internal stakeholders are not aligned before content development begins, creators may later be forced to navigate contradictory requests that increase revision cycles and production costs.

11. Paid Amplification of Influencer Content

Paid amplification of influencer marketing — using paid media to amplify influencer posts — is experiencing significant growth. A key reason that paid media has taken off is because it gives marketers a better way to measure ROI.

As noted in the contracting section, one of the most frequently discussed sources of waste is the failure to secure appropriate content rights upfront. If organizations anticipate using creator content for paid media amplification or other usage, those rights should be negotiated up front.

12. Agency Compensation

Marketers working with external agencies for their influencer marketing need to understand the transparency (or lack thereof) of the compensation agreements with those agencies. Marketers who value fee transparency should ask for it up front and require it as a condition of partnership in their services agreement. Furthermore, marketers must have internal alignment on their tolerance for non-transparent compensation structures should they exist with their respective agencies.

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Visibility into contracts, transparency around creator fees, and fee splits between agencies and talent can vary immensely. Knowing what matters to you and negotiating terms accordingly with agency partners is key. This may include disclosure of any markups or bundled pricing structures. Transparency should always be documented contractually and never assumed.

Wherever possible, marketers should seek a clear separation between agency compensation and influencer talent payments. Itemized fee structures enable more informed decision-making, support benchmarking, and allow marketers to separately assess the value delivered by agency services and the value delivered by creators.

13. Measurement

Historically, influencer marketing has been criticized for its perceived lack of accountability, with marketers relying heavily on engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares to evaluate performance. Increasingly, creator programs are expected to demonstrate business impact. Despite some progress, measurement remains one of the largest sources of waste within influencer marketing.

Many marketers struggle to determine whether influencer marketing investments are effective because they have not clearly defined what success looks like in the first place. Without established objectives, selecting appropriate KPIs becomes difficult and performance evaluation becomes inconsistent. Measurement frameworks should be built around business goals rather than platform metrics alone.

Fragmentation of measurement approaches across organizations can make it difficult to compare performance, identify best practices, or allocate budgets effectively. Fragmented reporting frequently requires marketers to spend significant amounts of time reconciling data from multiple sources rather than analyzing performance and making strategic decisions.

Specific solutions discussed to enhance measurement:

- URL tagging and hashtags can provide important measurement intelligence. While URL tags measure private actions driven by individual creators such as clicks and sales, hashtags measure public visibility and conversation across social media platforms.
- Paid amplification has emerged as one of the most important opportunities for improving measurement, often providing marketers with greater visibility into performance. As a result, paid amplification can help organizations better understand which creator partnerships and content strategies are driving business results.
- Many organizations are now integrating creator investments into marketing mix modeling frameworks, allowing brands to evaluate creator performance alongside other marketing channels.

Finally, measurement should function as a decision-making tool rather than a reporting exercise. Organizations that integrate measurement throughout the influencer marketing process are generally better positioned to identify inefficiencies, optimize investments, and maximize return on creator marketing spending.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Checklist of 37 Recommendations for Reducing Waste and Optimizing Investment in Influencer Marketing

1. Influencer Management

- Internally, centralize creator intelligence.
- Invest in operational infrastructure.
- Know all your external partners; more layers leads to higher risk of inefficiency, increased costs, and reduced transparency.

2. Selecting Influencers

- Prioritize audience relevance over audience size — “fit over fame.”
- Align influencer selection to brand goals.
- Discover creators through a content-first lens.

3. Vetting Influencers

- Establish corporate guardrails.
- Combine technology and human judgment.
- Evaluate for audience fraud.
- Use independent vetting.

4. Governance and Compliance

- Create standardized processes to apply consistently across campaigns.

5. Contracting Influencers

- Ensure internal alignment on deal terms and priorities before negotiations.
- Standardize contract templates.
- Confirm if creators are members of SAG-AFTRA and if so, be aware of the SAG-AFTRA obligations.
- Secure appropriate content rights upfront.
- Consider the need for allowlisting/boosting rights upfront.
- Ensure a proper morals clause.

6. Influencer Compensation

- Create flat rate cards (especially for nano and micro influencers) to avoid the inefficiency of negotiating with every influencer.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Tie rate cards to specific deliverables and timetables.
- Seek transparency into creator compensation (rather than having it bundled with agency fees, production costs, etc.).

7. **Briefing Influencers**
   - Balance structure and flexibility; do not be overly prescriptive.
   - Ensure internal alignment before creators receive briefs.
   - Include guidelines for FTC compliance.

8. **Platform-Specific Content**
   - Influencer content should be platform-specific.

9. **Content Production**
   - Don't underestimate the resources, time, and coordination required.
   - Demand cost transparency.
   - Establish ironclad production guidelines.

10. **Content Approval/Clearance**
    - Define roles; establish who is reviewing and clearing materials.
    - Avoid excessive approval layers.

11. **Paid Amplification of Influencer Content**
    - Secure appropriate content rights upfront.

12. **Agency Compensation**
    - Marketers who value fee transparency should ask for it up front.
    - Seek a clear separation between agency compensation and influencer talent payments.

13. **Measurement**
    - Define what success looks like and build measurement frameworks around business goals rather than platform metrics.
    - URL tagging and hashtags can provide important measurement intelligence.
    - Paid amplification can also aid measurement.
    - Integrate creator investments into marketing mix modeling frameworks.
    - Measurement should function as a decision-making tool rather than a reporting exercise.

V. WHAT'S IMPORTANT, WHAT'S DIFFICULT, WHAT'S WASTEFUL (ANA MEMBER SURVEY)

We fielded a short survey to ANA client-side marketer members about the steps in the influencer marketing process for perspective on their importance, relative ease/difficulty, and where waste occurs. Those steps include selecting influencers, vetting, briefing, governance/compliance, agency models for influencer management, content production, measurement, and more.

This survey was conducted between June 23 and July 27, 2026, among ANA member client-side marketers. There were 102 respondents who started the survey, and 90 got through the two screener questions; 78 then proceeded to start the survey to answer the primary questions. The survey instrument is **here**.

Respondents were first asked to rate the importance of each step in the influencer marketing process, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 equaled “Not at all important” and 5 equaled “Very important.” Two steps clearly rose to the top in importance: selecting influencers and vetting influencers. Other steps also rated high in importance were creative briefing of influencers, measurement, and governance/compliance.

Importance

	Top 2-Box	5	4
Selecting influencers	100%	86%	14%
Vetting influencers	97%	82%	15%
Creative briefing of influencers	91%	55%	36%
Measurement	85%	53%	32%
Governance and compliance	79%	50%	29%
Content review and approval	73%	45%	28%
Paid media amplification	66%	33%	33%
Negotiation and contracting influencers	63%	23%	40%
Creating bespoke content for different platforms	49%	22%	27%
Selecting your agency model	46%	20%	26%
Agency compensation	37%	11%	26%

V. WHAT'S IMPORTANT, WHAT'S DIFFICULT, WHAT'S WASTEFUL (ANA MEMBER SURVEY)

Respondents were next asked to rate the ease/difficulty of each step in the influencer marketing process, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 equaled "Very easy" and 5 equaled "Very difficult." Measurement was rated most difficult, by a wide margin. Steps rated next most difficult were vetting influencers, negotiation and contracting influencers, and selecting influencers. It's interesting that three of the steps rated as most important were also rated as being most difficult: selecting influencers, vetting influencers, and measurement.

Difficulty

	Top 2-Box	5	4
Measurement	67%	32%	35%
Vetting influencers	45%	25%	20%
Negotiation and contracting influencers	41%	13%	28%
Selecting influencers	41%	13%	28%
Governance and compliance	33%	16%	17%
Creating bespoke content for different platforms	33%	7%	26%
Content review and approval	29%	15%	14%
Agency compensation	29%	12%	17%
Selecting your agency model	28%	12%	16%
Creative briefing of influencers	20%	4%	16%
Paid media amplification	15%	6%	9%

V. WHAT'S IMPORTANT, WHAT'S DIFFICULT, WHAT'S WASTEFUL (ANA MEMBER SURVEY)

Respondents were then asked to identify the steps of the influencer marketing process that provide opportunities to eliminate waste and optimize investment, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 equaled "low opportunity to eliminate waste/optimize investment" and 5 equaled "high opportunity to eliminate waste/optimize investment." Negotiation and contracting influencers was at the top of the list. Steps that followed were vetting influencers, selecting influencers, agency compensation, selecting your agency model, and measurement.

Opportunity to Eliminate Waste and Optimize Investment

	Top 2-Box	5	4
Negotiation and contracting influencers	60%	32%	30%
Vetting influencers	54%	32%	22%
Selecting influencers	49%	32%	17%
Agency compensation	49%	32%	17%
Selecting your agency model	49%	17%	32%
Measurement	48%	29%	19%
Paid media amplification	33%	9%	24%
Content review and approval	32%	14%	18%
Creating bespoke content for different platforms	32%	13%	19%
Creative briefing of influencers	27%	10%	17%
Governance and compliance	24%	10%	14%

In summary, steps that were rated most important, most difficult, and having the high opportunity to eliminate waste/optimize investment were selecting influencers, vetting influencers, and measurement.

Finally for the survey, there was an open-ended question asking respondents to comment on the biggest opportunities to eliminate waste/optimize investment in the influencer marketing process. Key verbatim comments are shared throughout this report.

VI. DETAILED FINDINGS

The remaining sections of this report are devoted to each step of the influencer marketing process — one at a time — and results of the member survey are reprised as appropriate.

1. MODELS FOR INFLUENCER MANAGEMENT

This section addresses models for managing the influencer marketing process — both internally at the marketer level as well as via external support from agencies and other providers.

Influencer management can become a significant source of waste as inefficiencies can stem from the systems, partners, and processes used to manage creator relationships. Some organizations manage influencer marketing primarily in-house, while others rely on agencies, technology platforms, or hybrid structures that combine multiple partners. Throughout the working group discussions, experts consistently emphasized that there is no universally correct management model. Rather, the optimal approach depends on factors such as organization size, internal expertise, budget, campaign complexity, and desired levels of control.

Internally at the marketer level, one of the most frequently discussed challenges is organizational fragmentation. As influencer marketing programs grow, responsibilities for creator activities often become distributed across multiple teams. Without coordination, organizations can find themselves duplicating efforts, competing internally for creator relationships, or managing inconsistent creator experiences. Several experts noted that large organizations often lack visibility into creator partnerships occurring across different business units. Thus, one team may negotiate with a creator without realizing that another team has already worked with that individual. Beyond creating inefficiencies, this fragmentation can reduce negotiation leverage, create inconsistent compensation structures, and prevent organizations from benefiting from prior learnings and performance data.

Throughout the discussions, experts repeatedly emphasized the importance of establishing clear ownership and accountability at the marketer level to reduce duplication and improve decision-making efficiency. Regardless of the specific management structure utilized, organizations benefit from defining who is responsible for creator selection, vetting, contracting, campaign management, measurement, reporting, etc.

One of the most frequently discussed opportunities involved centralizing creator intelligence. Several experts recommended creating systems that allow organizations to track creator relationships, performance history, compensation arrangements, audience characteristics, and prior campaign outcomes. Centralized visibility can help reduce duplication, improve negotiations, and support more informed creator decisions.

Another source of inefficiency occurs when organizations attempt to scale influencer marketing without investing in operational infrastructure. Processes that may work effectively when managing a small number of creators can quickly become difficult to sustain as programs expand. Contracting, approvals, reporting, compliance monitoring, and creator communications can consume significant time and resources if appropriate systems are not in place.

1. MODELS FOR INFLUENCER MANAGEMENT

According to Ryan Detert of Influential, consider establishing a “Creator Center of Excellence.” While implementation approaches vary, the underlying objective is to establish consistent standards, governance frameworks, and best practices across creator marketing activities. A centralized structure can improve coordination, increase transparency, and help organizations scale influencer marketing more effectively. It can also serve as a single source of truth for talent oversight, brand safety, and campaign measurement.

Externally, the discussions highlighted the growing complexity of the influencer ecosystem and the increasing number of parties involved in creator partnerships. Marketers may work through multiple agencies, talent representatives, technology providers, creator management organizations, and production partners before ultimately reaching the creator. While these intermediaries can provide valuable expertise and operational support, each additional layer can introduce costs, reduce transparency, and slow decision-making. There are parallels to programmatic media given the complexity and various intermediaries there.

In some cases, overlapping responsibilities across partners can result in marketers paying multiple times for similar strategic services. As mediasense explained, “The traditional agency, specialist agency, and sometimes the tech partner may all bring you influencer ideas, which means you are probably paying multiple times for someone to bring you an influencer strategy.” Marketers must carefully evaluate the role of each partner to ensure resources are being directed toward value-added activities rather than duplicative services.

Transparency emerged as another recurring concern. Marketers often have limited visibility into agency compensation structures, creator fees, markups, technology costs, and other financial arrangements. This lack of transparency can make it difficult to evaluate efficiency, compare alternatives, or determine whether investments are generating appropriate value.

mediasense also highlighted growing concerns regarding potential conflicts of interest as agency holding companies continue to acquire influencer agencies and develop closer relationships with creators and talent management organizations. As they put it, “Agencies have their priorities; you have your priorities. It can reduce transparency around influencer costs and campaign effectiveness.” While these arrangements may provide efficiencies and access, they can also create situations in which incentives are not fully aligned, making independent evaluation and cost transparency increasingly important for marketers.

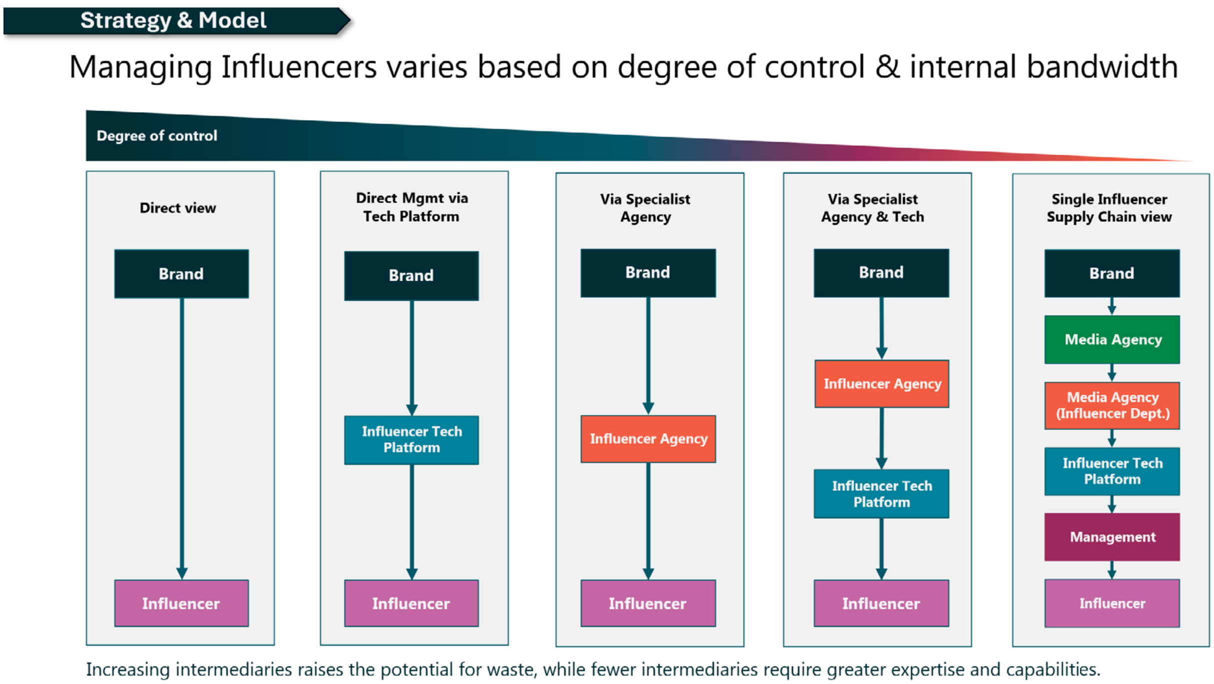
Survey respondents commented on the biggest opportunities to eliminate waste/optimize investment in influencer management:

“*Streamline operational processes. Consolidating tools, standardizing briefs, simplifying approval workflows, and maintaining a vetted creator roster can reduce administrative overhead and agency hours while enabling faster execution.*”

“*Within our organization influencer marketing sits across multiple pyramids amplifying the wasted investment through disparate strategies.*”

1. MODELS FOR INFLUENCER MANAGEMENT

There are various models for managing influencers. The key takeaway is simple: The more layers, the higher risk of inefficiency, increased costs, and reduced transparency. mediasense provided the model below.



Source: mediasense

Direct View

In theory, the "direct view" model on the left is the most efficient. It's an approach where the brand works directly with influencers. It provides full control over the relationship, the content, the spending, and the performance. However, it's not feasible for most advertisers. While it can minimize waste by removing layers, it can be resource intensive and hard to scale. One also doesn't benefit from the automation that a tech platform can bring and expertise that agencies can offer. Engaging influencers directly from the brand without agency involvement is more time-consuming for internal teams as they need to develop more knowledge and expertise.

Some brands have developed strong relationships working directly with big talent agencies (like CAA) that now have influencer departments. If that fits with your strategy and the type of talent needed, that's a good way to find and connect with influencers — but they're not going to provide those other nuts and bolts to really support your programs.

1. MODELS FOR INFLUENCER MANAGEMENT

Direct Management via Tech Platform

In the “direct management via tech platform” model, the tech platform can be an important efficiency driver and help with influencer discovery (i.e., matching brands with influencers), contracting, management, and performance tracking. As creator programs grow, technology can help automate administrative tasks, improve reporting consistency, and provide visibility into campaign performance. Yet it’s important for brands to understand the terms of service for those platforms, and what their rights are vis-à-vis the influencers and what the limitations are.

Marketers should seek clarity on platform costs. Platform fees can add up if there is not strong internal guidance, and inefficiencies can creep in. Make sure that the platform cost is not bundled into the influencer fee, particularly if you’re doing a markup model. Some marketers have paid for that platform several times over because agencies continue to charge a platform fee. According to one SME, “You’d be surprised at how often we see the same fee for the same thing that the clients already paid for.”

This model has a balance between control and efficiency, reducing some of the manual tasks while maintaining oversight.

Specialist Agency

The third model is outsourcing to a specialist influencer agency. That clearly reduces the internal workload but also introduces additional fees and the potential misalignment with your priorities. It can also reduce transparency around influencer costs and campaign effectiveness.

According to one SME, “We’re seeing more and more of these. Major holding companies are now acquiring influencer agencies; oftentimes these agencies also represent influencers. Therefore, they’re not only your agency, but they’re also the agent for the talent so you have to consider the potential conflicts of interest in that relationship. When working with agencies that also have an arm or a division within that agency that also represents the talent, clients are encouraged to dig in deep and ask questions about how to manage potential conflicts of interest.”

Specialist Agency and Tech

The next model — with the specialist agency and tech platform — is common as it combines expertise with efficiency. Yet it can increase costs (if not done right) and slow down decision making, leading to more waste. It’s important to clarify responsibilities between the agency and tech platform to avoid duplication.

Single Influencer Supply Chain

The model on the far right — single influencer supply chain view — is common for large advertisers. It provides scale. But since there are multiple stakeholders, it can reduce efficiency, speed, and transparency.

What might not be shared is that holding companies may be white labeling both the specialist agency and the technology layer, so marketers have no visibility of pass-through or extra costs.

1. MODELS FOR INFLUENCER MANAGEMENT

Agencies often have preferred relationships with a selection of influencers. A SME said, "We're seeing more of the preferred network — even in the curation stage. You might go through the list and maybe two of the five meet your needs. That's because they are in the agency's network. They're typically not telling you at the beginning who's in their network and who's not. So definitely ask for transparency; you might end up seeing a much wider net. It's just amazing how we see the same list of people, over and over again."

Preferred Models

There was a good discussion about moving toward the models on the left. For example, the brand owning the seat in the relationship with the tech platform and either not using an agency or only using an agency for bigger scale activations. That helps with transparency/visibility, creative control, having direct conversations with influencers, and knowing specifically who you will be paying. Also, if there is an agency change, consistency is maintained as this relationship is more portable.

Also to be considered:

- More media agencies are proposing influencers.
- Some traditional agencies have talent buying teams.
- There is an increasing trend toward influencer services being wrapped into agency non-transparent services (like principal media). The major agency holding companies have influencer agencies that are part of their non-transparent services. This is an opportunity for agencies to not disclose markups on fees and increase revenue.
- It's a best practice to include in media agency MSAs the terms and conditions that address influencers, because so many media agencies are connecting clients with influencers. Contracts with agencies should also address their role in hiring influencers. If you need to transfer any liability, there needs to be clauses in the contract that address that.

Several experts advocated for simplifying influencer management wherever possible. While complex ecosystems may evolve naturally over time, organizations should periodically review their operating models to identify opportunities for streamlining workflows, reducing redundancy, and improving accountability.

Ultimately, the discussions suggested that successful influencer management is less about choosing a specific model and more about creating clarity. Organizations that lack clear ownership, accountability, transparency, and coordination often struggle to maximize the value of creator investments regardless of which management structure they adopt. Organizations that establish transparent processes, define responsibilities clearly, maintain visibility into creator relationships, and invest in operational infrastructure are generally better positioned to maximize efficiency while minimizing waste.

1. MODELS FOR INFLUENCER MANAGEMENT

“We have to stop treating Influencer marketing as a side project and start treating it as a core strategic communication pillar. Marketers really need to look internally first and perform an organizational assessment — of their structure, their agency ecosystem, ways of working, and define exactly how influencers may fit within their overall communications mix. Next, we must expect absolute transparency throughout the entire Influencer ecosystem — on commercial terms, talent costs, tech platform fees, and agency services. We should be moving toward models that give us a direct view of our creator relationships, our spending and its performance. Finally, influencer marketing should have the same level of accountability as other brand communications and media channels — in clarity of ownership within a marketing organization as well as holding these investments to the same performance KPIs — and then having the most effective and efficient tactics drive your performance and business.”

— ANDRE MARCIANO, SENIOR DIRECTOR, GLOBAL MEDIA, INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS CENTER OF EXCELLENCE, BROWN-FORMAN

BROWN-FORMAN

2. SELECTING INFLUENCERS

Selecting influencers is a critical step in the influencer marketing process, as it affects campaign reach, audience relevance, content quality, engagement, cost, and ultimately return on investment. In the survey of ANA members, selecting influencers was rated as the undisputed most important step in the influencer marketing process and one of the most difficult, as well as having a high opportunity to eliminate waste and optimize investment.

Influencers fall into the following tiers:

- Celebrity influencers (one million-plus followers) offer reach and mass awareness, with higher cost.
- Macro influencers (100,000 to one million followers) strike a good balance between reach and engagement, making them more ideal for the consideration phase.
- Micro influencers (10,000 to 100,000) are more for trust building and education.
- Nano influencers (less than 10,000) can have stronger connections with their audiences, which are smaller. They are often used for localized campaigns.

Experts consistently emphasized that no single creator tier is inherently better than another. Rather, the appropriate creator depends on campaign objectives and desired business outcomes.

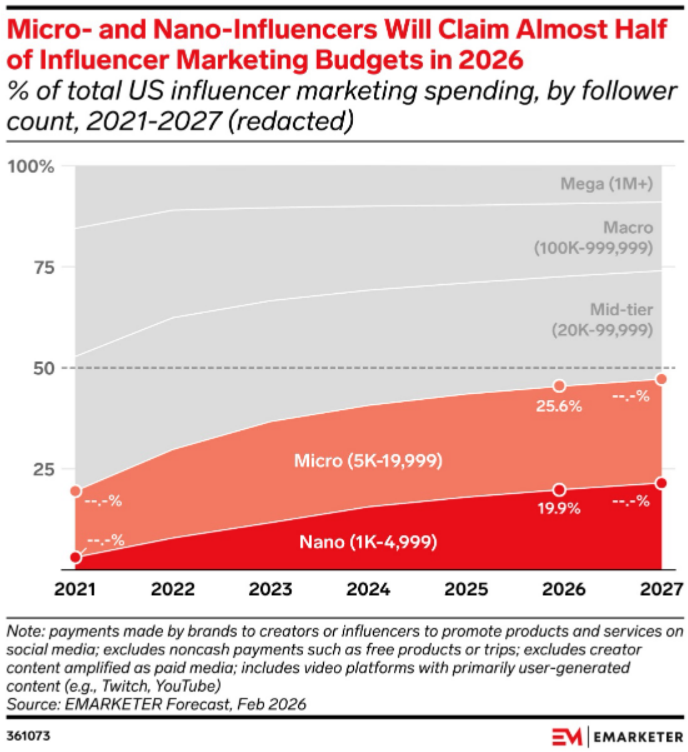
Historically, influencer selection centered around audience size, with marketers gravitating toward creators with the largest followings. However, many experts noted that this approach can create significant inefficiencies when audience size is prioritized over audience relevance and alignment with campaign objectives.

Scalable co-founder Kaya Yurieff noted that “the million-follower era is coming to an end,” explaining that creator selection today should focus less on follower count and more on the specific communities, interests, and audiences a creator serves. As social platforms increasingly rely on algorithm-driven content discovery, a creator’s ability to reach a relevant audience is often more important than the size of that audience. It was noted that, “We are living in a ’TikTok for you’ culture where we are served new content based on the previous content we engaged with, rather than via the creators we engaged with/subscribe to.” That’s a huge shift in the way the right creators are discovered. We need to discover creators through a content-first lens. It’s the content that captures attention from audiences. According to Yurieff, “Consider what content is resonating with your audience, not just what creators… to discover the right influencers.” We’re in this new era of algorithm-driven feeds. The follower count doesn’t really matter as much anymore. It’s really about the topic and niche of what the creator is. As a result, marketers who continue to rely heavily on follower count may find themselves paying premium rates to reach consumers who are unlikely to engage with the brand or take meaningful action.

Whalar Group highlighted the growing importance of smaller creators, noting the increasing dominance of nano influencers within the creator ecosystem.

2. SELECTING INFLUENCERS

Similarly, EMARKETER data projects that nearly half of influencer marketing spending will be directed toward nano and micro influencers in 2026.



Source: EMARKETER

These trends suggest that marketers increasingly value audience relevance and authenticity alongside reach.

A key principle is to align influencers to brand goals. Choosing the wrong influencer can lead to wasted spend, inefficient messaging, and missed opportunities. The right influencer depends on the audience, the desired persona, and the funnel stage targeted.

Survey respondents commented on the biggest opportunities to eliminate waste/optimize investment in influencer selection:

> *"Currently we still use creators as one-off large initiatives. This results in onboarding, legal, education, etc. every time we brief a new batch of influencers. There could be potential to build out a more robust lineup to pull from on a reoccurring basis to increase efficiency."*

> *"Prioritize long-term creator partnerships over one-off activations. Repeated partnerships typically drive stronger authenticity, content quality, and audience trust while reducing acquisition, contracting, onboarding, and creative development costs across campaigns."*

2. SELECTING INFLUENCERS

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been a great aid in identifying the right influencers for a brand. According to Influential, one can feed in criteria such as:

- Have they talked about your brand before?
- Have they mentioned competitors?
- Their history on the platforms and various campaigns done before
- Appeal to certain audiences
- Affinities, psychographics, personality traits
- Are they perceived as adventurous, hedonistic, altruistic, conservative?

Several experts also noted that waste often occurs when marketers begin searching for creators before clearly defining campaign objectives. Without a clear understanding of what a campaign is intended to accomplish, marketers may struggle to identify the creators best positioned to deliver those outcomes, leading to inefficient investments and measurement challenges later in the process.

- If the objective is rooted in awareness or reaching new types of customers, a marketer might select creators who have appeal to a broader, mass audience.
- Yet if the objective is to drive conversion-based performance, marketers might instead gravitate toward a creator with an already highly-engaged or niche audience who has covered their brand before.

Several participants within the working group noted that organizations sometimes engage multiple creators whose audiences substantially overlap, resulting in repeated spending against the same consumers. Others highlighted situations in which different teams within the same organization independently pursue relationships with the same creators, reducing negotiating leverage and creating inconsistent approaches. It is therefore critical for organizations to have centralized visibility into creator relationships. As creator marketing programs scale, organizations benefit from maintaining records of creator performance, compensation history, audience characteristics, and prior partnerships. Centralized creator intelligence can help reduce duplication, improve negotiation efforts, and support more informed investment decisions over time.

Additionally, the working group stressed the importance of evaluating whether creators genuinely align with a brand. It is not unusual for brand and creator partnerships to begin because the creator already utilizes the brand in some way and talked about it organically before ever entering into a brand deal.

Influencer personalities the Virzi Triplets noted that marketers often focus heavily on audience metrics while overlooking whether creators are authentic advocates for the products and brands they promote. As they told the working group, “Selecting the right influencer should be about fit over fame. Don’t force a partnership that doesn’t feel organic.”

2. SELECTING INFLUENCERS

Partnerships that lack authentic alignment may produce content that feels forced or transactional, ultimately reducing its effectiveness with audiences. This can result in marketers investing significant resources in creator partnerships, content development, and media support that fail to generate the desired levels of engagement and trust. EMARKETER reinforced this idea, noting that "creator relationships will need to feel more than transactional to deliver optimal impact," highlighting the value of genuine partnerships grounded in trust and familiarity.

Additional factors to consider when shortlisting influencers:

- What is the influencer's audience quality, relevancy, and engagement authenticity?
- What controls and brand safety metrics are in place?
- What is the influencer's crisis management plan?
- Does the influencer have a history of delivering measurable business outcomes?
- Has the influencer's background been vetted?

Finally, there is value in maintaining ongoing creator partnerships from an investment perspective rather than relying exclusively on one-off engagements. Long-term relationships can improve efficiency by reducing onboarding time, limiting the need for repeated education and contract negotiations, and allowing creators to develop a stronger understanding of the brand and its objectives. Ongoing partnerships also provide marketers with richer performance data over time, allowing them to better understand what messaging, content formats, and creator characteristics drive results.

> **"We take a two-pronged approach to influencer selection — both smart tech and human judgment. First, we scan for creators who actually fit the brief — looking at audience demographics, engagement quality, and brand safety signals so we know they meet our standards. Then we layer in human insight. That's where nuance comes in — tone, values, past content, and whether they truly feel like a natural fit. At the end of the day, brand fit beats popularity every time. We'd rather partner with someone who's authentically aligned with our brand than someone with a huge following, but the wrong vibe."**
>
> **— NICOLINA JOHNSON, SENIOR BRAND MANAGER, LA-Z-BOY, INC.**

3. VETTING INFLUENCERS

As influencer marketing becomes more ubiquitous, the potential consequences associated with creator-related issues have increased as well. A creator's content, behavior, affiliations, audience composition, or public reputation can all impact a brand. This makes thorough vetting an increasingly critical component of the creator selection process. Brands need to know the people representing them.

In the survey of ANA members, vetting influencers was rated as one of the most important steps in the influencer marketing process and one of the most difficult, as well as having a high opportunity to eliminate waste and optimize investment.

Once potential creators have been identified, marketers must determine whether those individuals represent appropriate partners for their brands. Influencer vetting is all about risk — to prevent risk, mitigate risk, and manage risk if things go wrong. While influencer selection focuses on identifying creators who can help achieve campaign objectives, vetting focuses on identifying potential risks before a partnership begins.

According to Kroll, approximately one-quarter of influencers reviewed through professional vetting services contain content or behaviors significant enough to warrant client attention. While many of these issues may not ultimately disqualify a creator, the finding shows the importance of conducting systematic reviews before partnerships are finalized.

Vetting is typically done before the influencer even knows that the client is interested in them. Usually, a client would vet a number of influencers it has interest in potentially hiring. Kroll noted one of the primary goals of vetting is to identify issues before financial commitments are made, stating that the objective is to "mitigate risk before there's a need to claw back money after someone has already been hired, or worse, to repair reputational damage." When issues are discovered after a partnership has begun, resources that could have been directed toward campaign execution and performance may instead have to be diverted toward crisis management, content removal, contract disputes, and reputational repair.

Vetting consists of visual tech (via AI) looking for weapons, violence, nudity, extremist slogans, etc. There's also AI-automated text-based analysis looking for any signs of discrimination, aggression, profanity, antisemitism, conspiratorial thinking, derogatory slurs, etc. Furthermore, there can be unique brand-specific risk categories that could include specific competitors.

The discussions also highlighted the growing complexity of the vetting process. Historically, vetting may have consisted primarily of reviewing a creator's recent social media activity. Today, marketers often need to evaluate historical content, audience quality, online behavior, public statements, legal considerations, and broader reputation indicators.

Marketers should establish standardized risk assessment frameworks. Rather than evaluating each creator independently using different criteria, consistent evaluation processes allow for more objective comparisons across creators and campaigns. These frameworks may include content reviews, audience assessments, brand alignment evaluations, and compliance considerations.

3. VETTING INFLUENCERS

While technology has significantly improved vetting capabilities and can efficiently review large volumes of content across multiple platforms, technology should not entirely replace human judgment. Automated tools may flag content that ultimately poses little risk while overlooking more nuanced concerns involving humor, satire, cultural context, or different social norms.

Organizations that depend entirely on automated screening may make decisions based on incomplete assessments, creating unnecessary risk or causing potentially valuable creator partnerships to be overlooked. Despite the dominance of tech, manual vetting still plays a critical role in multiple areas:

- **Contextual judgment:** Technology may flag content that requires human interpretation. For example, satire, cultural nuance, or evolving social norms may not be accurately assessed by algorithms.
- **Brand alignment:** Manual review helps ensure that an influencer's tone, values, and off-platform behavior align with the brand's ethos.
- **Contractual compliance:** Legal experts recommend including clauses that require influencers to disclose all accounts, notify brands of risky activity, and adhere to codes of conduct. These are often enforced through manual oversight.
- **Agency conflicts:** Agencies may have a financial interest in promoting certain influencers. Independent manual vetting — outside of agency recommendations — is advised to avoid superficial checks and conflicts of interest.

Throughout the working group discussions, vetting consistently emerged as one of the most important safeguards within the influencer marketing process and one of the most effective ways to prevent costly mistakes. As Keri Bruce, a partner at Reed Smith LLP, explained, "Choosing and vetting influencers is critical. Companies should establish clear rules and guardrails for selecting the influencers they work with, and make sure those standards are clearly communicated to their agencies and other partners." Establishing these guardrails can help organizations create a more consistent and disciplined approach to creator partnerships.

The working group identified inadequate vetting as one of the most common sources of waste within influencer marketing. In some cases, marketers move quickly to secure popular creators without conducting sufficient due diligence. While this may accelerate campaign timelines in the short term, it can create larger challenges later if problematic content, reputational issues, or audience fraud are discovered after contracts have been signed.

3. VETTING INFLUENCERS

Audience fraud was a recurring concern. Several working group discussions highlighted the continued presence of fake followers, purchased engagement, bots, and manipulated audience metrics across the creator ecosystem. According to mediasense, "Detection of fake followers is crucial for minimizing waste." According to one **study**, 15 percent of all spending on influencer marketing was lost directly to fraud. Organizations that fail to evaluate audience authenticity risk paying for reach and engagement that provide little actual business value. In these situations, marketing dollars may be directed toward inflated audiences rather than genuine consumers.

Several experts advocate for independent vetting whenever possible. As they suggested, independent vetting — outside of agency recommendations — is advised to avoid superficial checks and conflicts of interest. Agencies may have a financial interest in promoting certain influencers, so independent reviews can provide an objective perspective and help organizations evaluate creators without the influence of external financial incentives. An analogy here is the use of outside ad verification companies in programmatic advertising to identify invalid traffic, non-viewable impressions, and brand safety, rather than using an agency "to grade its own homework."

Importantly, vetting should also not be viewed as a one-time exercise. Creators continue to publish content long after contracts are signed, and circumstances can change quickly. If you're keeping an influencer for a period of time, there should be a re-vetting or monitoring. Organizations that conduct extensive reviews prior to engagement but perform little monitoring afterward may expose themselves to emerging risks later in the relationship.

Finally, vetting should be viewed as an investment to protect marketing spend, rather than a cost. While comprehensive vetting requires resources, the potential costs associated with reputational damage, campaign disruptions, legal issues, or ineffective partnerships are often significantly greater. Again, consider the analogy to programmatic advertising where outside companies monitor for brand safety. Organizations that invest in robust vetting processes are generally better positioned to avoid costly mistakes while improving the quality and effectiveness of their creator partnerships.

CASE STUDY: LENOVO AND SUPERHEROES

PLACING CREATORS AT THE CENTER OF A CAMPAIGN

Lenovo Yoga is a premium lineup of PCs best known for inventing the modern 2-in-1 convertible laptop, featuring a signature 360-degree hinge that allows the device to flip completely from a standard laptop into a tablet. Over the years, the lineup has expanded past flexible laptops to include ultra-thin traditional clamshells, powerful creator workstations, and even unique all-in-one desktop systems.

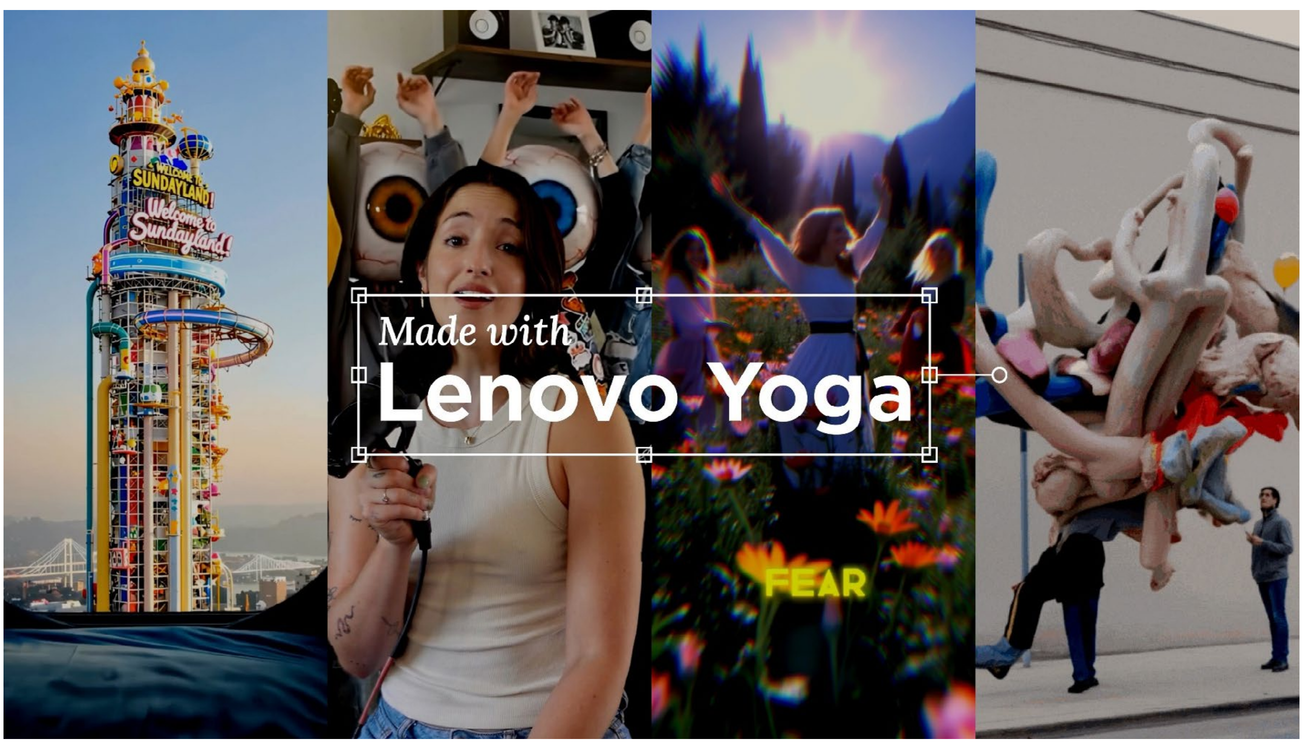
Lenovo Yoga targets gen Z creators aged 18 to 26 — specifically, emerging creative professionals, aspirants, and everyday content creators who are building their craft.

Business Challenge

Gen Z overwhelmingly identifies as creative — four out of five say creativity defines them. But when AI entered the conversation, many young artists saw it as disconnected from real craft: too automated and lacking human expression. At the same time, Lenovo Yoga was launching a new generation of AI-powered PCs in a crowded hardware category dominated by feature-driven marketing. Awareness wasn't the issue — credibility with young creatives was. The challenge was to prove Lenovo Yoga belonged in real creative workflows, not just product advertising.

Insights and Strategy

The campaign was built on two fundamental insights: gen Z trusts creators far more than brands, and they are super interested in their creative process. Highly polished product marketing often feels disconnected from the realities of modern creative work. For the target, credibility comes from seeing tools used by people they admire and respect — not from hearing brands describe their capabilities.



CASE STUDY: LENOVO AND SUPERHEROES

PLACING CREATORS AT THE CENTER OF A CAMPAIGN

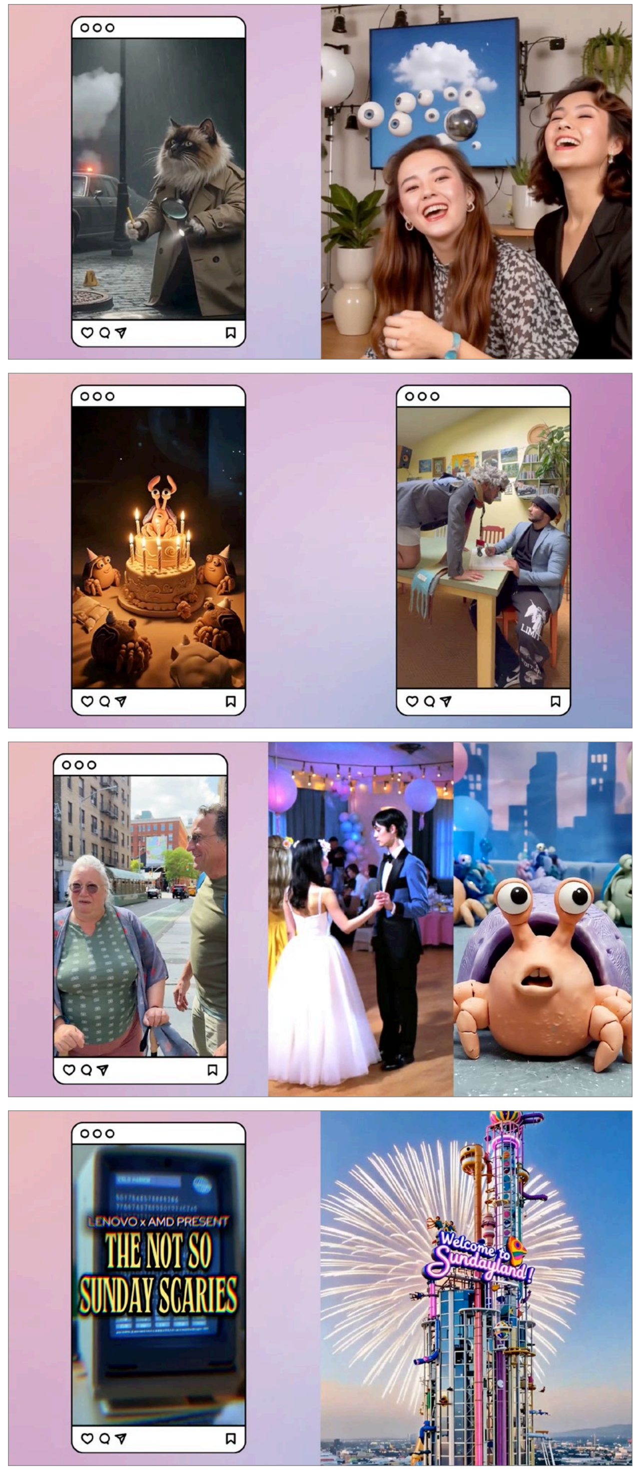
Concept/Big Idea

Instead of relying on traditional brand advertising, Lenovo launched “Made with Lenovo Yoga,” an always-on platform that celebrates all the ups and downs of the creative process, turning creators into the primary voice of the campaign while expanding their reach through collaborations with other cultural influencers.

Every six weeks, creators were given cultural briefs inspired by gen Z themes, ranging from future anxiety to modern love stories, and challenged to interpret the idea through their own artistic lens. Creators experimented with prompts, generated visuals, iterated concepts, and built entirely new creative worlds with their Lenovo Yoga and a mix of AI, VFX, and “hybrid” creativity.

The real story wasn’t the finished product. It was how creators made it. Artists showed behind-the-scenes, “How I Made It” content, revealing their creative decisions, experiments, and challenges. These authentic moments turned the creator journey into compelling storytelling while naturally showcasing Lenovo’s features and capabilities.

By placing creators at the center of the campaign and making the process the story, Lenovo Yoga shifted the narrative from brand promotion to creator expression. Rather than directing creators to speak for the brand, Lenovo Yoga created a place designed for them to express their own voice, fully and authentically.



CASE STUDY: LENOVO AND SUPERHEROES

PLACING CREATORS AT THE CENTER OF A CAMPAIGN

Activation/Tactics

Creators served as the primary media channel for the campaign. They released original films and other creative projects across their social platforms, documenting how they used Lenovo Yoga to experiment, generate ideas, and build their work from concept to completion. Specific social media channels were Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

To expand cultural reach, creators also collaborated with musicians, comedians, and other digital influencers, bringing additional perspectives and audiences into the creative process. These collaborations blended visual art, music, comedy, and storytelling, while showcasing how Lenovo Yoga supported hybrid creative workflows.

Each release included both the finished creative work and behind-the-scenes storytelling that revealed prompts, revisions, and experimentation. New briefs were introduced every six weeks, ensuring a constant flow of fresh perspectives and "in-the-moment" creative interpretations.

By letting creators lead the narrative, Lenovo Yoga positioned itself not as a brand speaking to creators, but as a tool used and endorsed by them. And it didn't stop there: Lenovo also expanded on the program, launching a free-for-all Digital and AI Art School, and a podcast series with in-depth conversations about AI craft and creativity.

Results

Made with Lenovo Yoga delivered both cultural impact and incredible business results. Most importantly, Lenovo Yoga experienced 23 percent global sales growth, driven by increased interest in AI-powered PCs among creative audiences. Other key results:

- 1.5-plus billion total views globally
- Millions of social engagements
- 16-point increase in brand lift
- 11-point increase in brand consideration.

The campaign also helped Lenovo secure the No. 1 position in global AI PC sales, proving that creator credibility can drive real market performance.

Creator content consistently outperformed traditional brand advertising, demonstrating the effectiveness of authentic creator storytelling.

Proudest Achievement Related to the Work

The campaign's proudest achievement was building significant relevance and consideration and winning market share with a hard to reach gen Z audience in a highly competitive category.

By transforming creators from promotional partners into true collaborators in the brand story and making the creative process — including product usage — the story, Lenovo Yoga now resonates with young creatives all over the world.

ANA REGGIE BRAND CATALYST AWARDS

This campaign was recognized in the ANA 2026 REGGIE Brand Catalyst Awards as a Gold winner in the Influencer- or Creator-Driven Campaign category, plus as a Gold winner in AI-powered creativity.

VI. DETAILED FINDINGS

4. GOVERNANCE AND COMPLIANCE

As influencer marketing has become increasingly sophisticated, governance and compliance have evolved from secondary considerations into essential components.

- Governance is proactive, creating the strategy, ethical frameworks, and decision-making processes for the organization. It defines the direction — how the organization achieves its goals.
- Compliance has traditionally been reactive, enforcing adherence to external laws, industry regulations, and internal policies after the fact. Increasingly, however, effective compliance should be proactive and integrated into governance, so that boundaries are built into decision-making from the outset rather than layered on afterward.

As creator programs expand and budgets grow, organizations face increasing pressure to establish governance and compliance processes that protect both the brand and the creators they work with. Influencer marketing sits at the intersection of advertising, media, talent management, public relations, commerce, and social media. It frequently involves multiple stakeholders — including legal, compliance, agency, media, and brand teams — each responsible for different aspects of campaign execution. Unclear ownership of the process and accountability create inefficiencies. Organizations should clearly establish who is responsible for aspects such as creator selection, vetting, contract management, approvals, monitoring, and crisis management. Otherwise, considerable time can be wasted responding to issues that arise simply because responsibilities were never clearly assigned. Clear ownership reduces duplication and delays while ensuring critical activities are completed consistently.

The working group's discussions consistently highlighted that governance is not simply a legal exercise. Rather, it serves as the foundation for managing risk, maintaining consistency, and supporting the long-term scalability of creator programs. One of the most common challenges identified by the working group is inconsistent compliance practices. As creator marketing programs scale, organizations benefit from creating standardized processes that can be applied consistently across campaigns to provide clear instructions to brands, agencies, and creators regarding disclosures, approvals, and regulatory expectations. As mediasense plainly put it, "there needs to be clear standardization to create a unified approach, particularly with global organizations or where there are multiple visionaries, units, brands, and categories." Standardization improves efficiency, promotes consistency across teams, and reduces reliance on ad hoc decision-making.

Organizations that lack formal governance frameworks often find themselves addressing problems after they occur rather than preventing them in advance. Reputational issues, compliance violations, creator controversies, and contractual disputes can require significant time, money, and organizational attention to address.

Despite years of guidance from the FTC regarding disclosure requirements, compliance issues remain common throughout the influencer ecosystem. It is imperative that marketer briefings for creators include guidelines for FTC compliance. Most fundamentally, the FTC requires disclosure of any "material connection" between an endorser and a brand — any relationship that might affect the weight consumers give the endorsement — whenever such a connection exists and would not reasonably be expected by consumers. Disclosures must be clear, conspicuous, and hard to miss (unambiguous, in the same language as the endorsement, and not buried in a hashtag string or behind a "more" button). See the FTC document, "**Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers**," for more information.

As the Virzi Triplets put it, "Assume the creators know as little as possible about it (the FTC guidelines)." When brands fail to provide clear guidance in their contracts and in their creative briefs regarding disclosures and compliance expectations, misunderstandings often result, leading to additional reviews, content revisions, approval delays, and administrative work that could have been avoided. Keri Bruce of Reed Smith emphasized that, "If an influencer fails to make the required disclosures, it's the brand, not the influencer, that is likely to be the first one facing scrutiny." She further cautioned that non-compliance could result in financial penalties, potential class action lawsuits, and damage to consumer trust.

The working group also discussed the importance of establishing clear expectations regarding creator conduct. As creator marketing becomes increasingly integrated into broader brand strategies, organizations are recognizing that a creator's activities outside a specific campaign can still affect brand reputation. Without clearly defined expectations, governance policies, and contractual protections, organizations may have limited options if issues arise.

Explicit behavior requirements, often referred to as morals clauses, should be integrated into influencer contracts along with expectations regarding disclosures, account ownership, content usage, and other compliance obligations rather than assumed.

Several experts also discussed the challenges associated with inconsistent governance standards across campaigns. One creator partnership may receive extensive oversight and review, while another receives minimal scrutiny. This inconsistency can create confusion internally, increase risk exposure, and make it difficult for an organization to establish repeatable best practices. Similarly, fragmented record-keeping and documentation can create inefficiencies when questions arise regarding approvals, disclosures, contractual obligations, or creator activity months after a campaign has concluded.

Monitoring should also be ongoing rather than limited to one-time reviews, continuing throughout the creator relationship rather than ending once content is published. This allows organizations to identify emerging concerns while maintaining visibility into creator activities over time.

Collectively, these discussions reinforced that governance and compliance are not obstacles to creator marketing success; rather, they are essential safeguards that help organizations reduce risk, improve consistency, and avoid unnecessary waste. Organizations that establish clear expectations, consistent processes, and defined accountability structures are generally better positioned to support efficient and scalable creator marketing programs.

SIDEBAR: INSTITUTE FOR RESPONSIBLE INFLUENCE

The creator economy has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar industry, with brands increasingly relying on creators to drive awareness, engagement, and sales. But as influencer marketing scales, so do the risks associated with unclear partnership disclosures and lack of regulatory knowledge. To address this growing challenge, BBB National Programs' Center for Industry Self-Regulation (CISR) launched the **Institute for Responsible Influence** (IRI), an industry initiative focused on educating creators and promoting responsible advertising practices across the creator economy. The IRI provides training and certification to help creators better understand advertising and disclosure requirements while giving brands greater confidence in the partnerships they build. Backed by industry organizations including the ANA, the 4As, and IAB, the IRI aims to provide a trusted framework for creator education and certification and help standardize disclosure, measurement, and accountability across the creator economy.

As influencer marketing expands, many individuals entering the space lack formal training in or awareness of FTC disclosure requirements and advertising compliance. The consequences can be significant. In 2025, ALO Yoga and their influencer partners faced a $150 million lawsuit alleging consumers were misled by undisclosed paid partnerships. Other recent class action lawsuits brought by consumers have targeted major brands including Celsius Energy Drinks, Revolve, and Shein, with cases alleging deceptive influencer marketing practices and failure to clearly disclose paid endorsements. Increasingly, lawsuits are being brought under state consumer protection laws by consumers themselves and not solely by the FTC. The message to brands and creators is clear: failure to provide "clear and conspicuous" disclosure creates significant legal, financial, and reputational risks.

According to BBB National Programs research, only 5 percent of consumers who purchased products based on creator recommendations say they fully trust creator content, 30 percent actively distrust it, 71 percent say clear sponsorship disclosure increases trust, and 70 percent say they have felt misled when paid partnerships were hidden. As consumer skepticism rises, transparency is essential to maintaining credibility in influencer marketing.

The IRI certification program provides creators with practical training on FTC disclosure requirements, truthful endorsements, regulatory expectations, responsible use of AI, proper use of music and intellectual property in sponsored content, and other emerging issues. The program is designed not only to educate creators, but also to support brands and their marketing teams as they seek more transparent and accountable creator partnerships. Creators who complete the program will be added to an official, searchable Certified Creator database, providing brands with an additional resource for identifying creators with a demonstrated knowledge of responsible advertising practices. Beyond certification, this program also includes ongoing monitoring and educational outreach designed to reinforce responsible practices over time. The IRI reflects a broader global movement toward professionalizing the creator economy. Responsible influence is increasingly becoming a competitive advantage, and the IRI's certification initiative represents an important step toward a more trusted, transparent, and sustainable creator economy for creators, brands, and consumers alike.

Institute for Responsible Influence

5. CONTRACTING INFLUENCERS

Once creators have been selected and vetted, marketers must establish the contractual framework that governs the relationship. Contracts should be viewed as strategic documents rather than administrative documents, as they play a critical role in determining both the effectiveness and efficiency of influencer marketing investments. Contracts establish expectations regarding deliverables, timelines, content ownership, usage rights, compliance obligations, approval processes, compensation structures, and performance requirements. Decisions made during the contracting stage frequently influence campaign flexibility, measurement capabilities, amplification opportunities, and ultimately return on investment.

As influencer marketing has matured, contracts have become increasingly complex. Creator partnerships now often include paid media amplification, social commerce initiatives, affiliate marketing arrangements, content licensing, and long-term ambassador relationships. As a result, contracts should be viewed as a strategic business necessity rather than simply a procurement exercise. Many inefficiencies associated with influencer marketing can be traced back to poorly structured contracts and fee arrangements.

Before contract negotiations even begin, it's important to have internal alignment on the marketer side regarding deal terms and priorities. Without that alignment, organizations may find themselves revisiting decisions and renegotiating terms down the road after they have already lost leverage. Keri Bruce of Reed Smith observed that, "Very often it's the brand side that starts changing the deal terms mid-negotiation, because they've decided they want something else or somebody else." These shifting expectations can create unnecessary delays, additional negotiations, administrative complexity, and cost the brand more in the end.

One of the most frequently discussed sources of waste is the failure to secure appropriate content rights upfront. If organizations anticipate using creator content for paid media amplification, social amplification, website placement, retail media activations, email marketing, or other purposes, those rights should be negotiated up front during negotiation of the deal terms and long before campaigns launch. Waiting until content has already proven successful shifts negotiating leverage to the creator and can result in substantially higher costs. In some cases, organizations may even lose the ability to fully capitalize on their strongest-performing content because the necessary rights were never secured. Securing these rights early can help avoid costly renegotiations and maximize the value of high-performing creator content across multiple channels. Options for additional services and/or rights can usually be negotiated up front if necessary, if a brand is unsure of its requirements.

5. CONTRACTING INFLUENCERS

The working group also discussed exclusivity provisions as a potential source of inefficiency. While exclusivity can help protect brand investments, overly broad restrictions increase creator compensation costs. Several experts noted that marketers sometimes request extensive exclusivity protections without fully evaluating whether such restrictions are necessary to achieve campaign objectives. As a result, organizations may pay significant premiums for protections that ultimately provide limited strategic value. When considering exclusivity, think about the following:

- Is it a short term, perhaps “one and done” campaign?
- Is it a periodic relationship where you have three or four scheduled posts across the year at key intervals?
- Is this an always-on influencer program where somebody’s a longer-term member of your influencer program?

Exclusivity should be considered when the role of the influencer will be associated with the brand for a long time. If exclusivity is required, consider limiting timeframes and be specific with brands versus broad categories.

Standardization of contract templates is another opportunity for efficiency. Organizations that frequently engage creators can improve efficiency by developing contractual frameworks that address common requirements while reducing repetitive negotiations. Standardization can accelerate execution while ensuring that important protections remain in place. Keri Bruce of Reed Smith recommended identifying “company non-negotiables” and establishing standard legal terms that can be applied consistently across creator partnerships, especially when the value of the contract is below a certain threshold. Some deals just aren’t worth spending a lot of time and resources negotiating. By reducing unnecessary negotiation and internal debate, organizations can streamline the negotiation process while maintaining appropriate protections. Commercial terms can be negotiated, but not the standard legal terms and conditions. Buy-in by and awareness among all company stakeholders is critical here. Standard “non-negotiable” terms can also help reduce the potential of setting bad precedent with creators and their agents. If a brand has certain contract provisions it never negotiates and is consistent with that message and does not deviate, then that can be beneficial in the long run.

Contract ambiguity emerged as another recurring concern. Unclear language regarding deliverables, timelines, approval requirements, content ownership, or performance expectations can lead to misunderstandings, delays, disputes, and additional administrative work. Organizations often spend considerable time resolving issues that could have been avoided through more precise contractual language and clearer expectations from the outset.

5. CONTRACTING INFLUENCERS

Other miscellaneous considerations for contracts are:

- Quality requirements should be integrated into contracts.
- Is allowlisting[1]/boosting[2] needed? Most creators will require that these rights be expressly stated to allow a brand to boost a post. Consider that from the start and whether it's important. Some influencers are very opposed to this because they only want their posts to be seen by the people who follow them. They don't want their posts showing up in feeds with paid media against it. Know when you go in, if that's important to you, and negotiate accordingly.
- Creators removing posts: This is about the influencer being able to remove posts from their feeds following the term. Many talent agencies and influencers are increasingly pushing for talent's ability to delete posts. Clients are encouraged to push back here.
- There needs to be protection in your contract with each influencer that deals with potential issues. You want to know all the accounts they have. You want to make sure they're adhering to whatever code of conduct you've established. You want to know if there's material changes, if they have new accounts, if they're on risky platforms, like deep in dark web type platforms, and other sort of forums.
- Have a proper morals clause in your contract with the influencer to protect against questionable behavior or content unrelated to your partnership.
- Periodically review contracting practices as creator marketing programs mature. As new platforms, content formats, and activation opportunities emerge, brand risks and contractual requirements may evolve.

Ultimately, effective contracting is about creating clarity and flexibility simultaneously. Organizations that establish clear expectations, secure appropriate rights, align incentives, and improve transparency are generally better positioned to maximize the value of creator partnerships while minimizing unnecessary costs and inefficiencies.

[1] Influencer allowlisting is a marketing strategy where a content creator grants a brand direct advertiser access to their social media accounts. This allows the brand to run paid advertisements that appear under the influencer's profile handle, photo, and identity, rather than the brand's own corporate profile.

[2] Boosting refers to the practice of putting paid media budget behind a creator's organic social media post to amplify its reach beyond their current followers. Instead of relying strictly on the platform's organic algorithm, a brand pays the social network to turn a high-performing influencer post into a targeted advertisement.

SIDEBAR: SAG/AFTRA IMPLICATIONS

A growing number of influencers are becoming members of the Screen Actors Guild — American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA). Therefore, when engaging influencers, it is important to confirm whether they are members of SAG-AFTRA. SAG-AFTRA is the labor union representing over 160,000 performers and media professionals worldwide and has agreements that govern everything a member would do in front of a video camera or behind a mic. Key agreements for the ad industry include the SAG-AFTRA Commercials Contract (including the Waiver for Influencer-Produced Sponsored Content) and the Agreement for Influencer-Produced Sponsored Content. The Joint Policy Committee (JPC) is the bargaining representative for the advertising industry in negotiations with SAG-AFTRA for the Commercials Contract and its Waiver for Influencer-Produced Sponsored Content.

Marketers must be aware of SAG-AFTRA obligations when: 1) their company (or hired ad agency) is a signatory to the Commercials Contracts, and/or 2) when hiring an influencer who is a union member. If you are unsure whether your company or your ad agency is a signatory to the Commercials Contracts, you may contact the JPC.

In 2021, the union promulgated the above-referenced Agreement for Influencer-Produced Sponsored Content (the "Influencer Agreement") which may be used by non-signatory brands and agencies to hire union member influencers. In 2021, the JPC and SAG-AFTRA similarly issued the Waiver for Influencer-Produced Sponsored Content (the "Influencer Waiver") which may be used by signatory brands and agencies to hire union member influencers.

The JPC released an overview of the differences between the Influencer Agreement and the Influencer Waiver, available **here**. In addition, the JPC and SAG-AFTRA jointly released FAQs on the Influencer Waiver, available **here**. The key distinctions are also summarized below:

- The SAG-AFTRA Influencer Agreement allows influencers who are members of SAG-AFTRA to ensure their compliance with Global Rule One of the SAG-AFTRA Constitution by covering their work under a SAG-AFTRA agreement. This framework gives influencers access to standard union protections, which can include health insurance and pension benefits. The Influencer Agreement applies when a non-signatory brand or agency engages a SAG-AFTRA influencer to produce content as defined in the Influencer Agreement. Under the Influencer Agreement, the influencer's loan-out company becomes the signatory. Key terms from the Influencer Agreement include:
    - The influencer must have a loan-out company.
    - The influencer must own the content being produced.
    - The content must be self-produced by the influencer.
    - The content may not be fully scripted.
    - No stunts, hazardous work, nudity, or sexually explicit content.
    - The fee paid to the influencer may be freely bargained and a 20 percent allocation applies for pension and health ("P&H") contribution calculations. The contribution rate through March 31, 2028 is 23.5 percent. This means, for example, that if an influencer is paid $10,000, the total contribution is $10,000 x 20 percent x 23.5 percent. The contribution is on top of the fee paid to the influencer.

SIDEBAR: SAG/AFTRA IMPLICATIONS

The influencer is responsible for submitting the required paperwork online via the union's website and paying the applicable P&H contribution in connection with the engagement. The final content can be distributed on the influencer's and the brand's owned social media channels, YouTube, and websites. Paid social media amplification is also allowed. Consent and full use fees under the Commercials Contract are required for use on TV.

- **The Influencer Waiver** is available to advertiser and agency signatories to the Commercials Contracts. The Influencer Waiver allows the signatory to hire influencers in a more cost-efficient manner while remaining compliant with their signatory obligations. In addition, it also provides a zero-risk option for signatories hiring non-union influencers to avoid the risk of producing in the "gray area" of content versus "commercial" by covering them under the Influencer Waiver. Signatories are only required to produce "commercials" under the Commercials Contracts. Some key distinctions available to advertiser and agency signatories under the Influencer Waiver include:
  - No requirement that the influencer has a loan out
  - No requirement that the influencer owns the content
  - Allows the brand or agency to handle P&H contributions directly at the lower 20 percent allocation rate. The agreement with the influencer must reference coverage under the Influencer Waiver.

Of course, when a non-signatory brand hires a non-union influencer, and no signatory agency is involved, SAG-AFTRA obligations will not apply.

When managing influencer marketing campaigns, protect your brand by ensuring proper terms are incorporated into your influencer contracts. Examples include covering usage rights consistent with those permitted by the Influencer Agreement or Influencer Waiver (as applicable) and detailing each party's obligations as they relate to SAG-AFTRA compliance.

For questions about the Influencer Agreement, the Influencer Waiver, or general rules regarding the engagement of SAG-AFTRA members, please reach out to Stacy Marcus (**smarcus@jointpolicycommittee.org**) or Kim Stevens (**kstevens@jointpolicycommittee.org**).

THE JOINT POLICY COMMITTEE, LLC

VI. DETAILED FINDINGS

6. INFLUENCER COMPENSATION

Compensation structures vary considerably across the creator ecosystem, resulting in complexity for marketers. Fixed fees, affiliate commissions,[3] revenue-sharing arrangements, performance incentives, product exchanges, and hybrid compensation models are all commonly used. Without clear alignment between compensation structures and campaign objectives, organizations may struggle to evaluate performance or determine whether investments are generating appropriate value.

Insight from our working group meetings:

- To avoid the inefficiency of negotiating with every influencer, create flat rate cards, especially for nano and micro influencers. Some marketers have peeled that away from the agencies recognizing that agency oversight is not needed there, generating further savings.
- Tie rate cards to clear and specific deliverables and timetables.
- Be clear about payment structures and ensure the creators know the payment terms and timing. Have accurate documentation, tracking, and accountability.
- Align the fee to the production standards — e.g., studio shoot with professional equipment versus a smartphone.
- When considering influencer compensation, be aware that there may be ways an influencer needs to invest to create content — travel, product, editing, graphics, hair/make-up, crew, music, etc.
- Some agencies may mark up the fee for talent costs — ask to see the details.
- Use a software solution to improve efficiency in cost and content tracking.
- Virtually every influencer now is working with an agent, and those agents are representing multiple influencers. If you're engaging with multiple influencers from a specific talent agency, be aware of precedent you're setting with your deal terms. Be very aware of setting bad precedents. Agents are not afraid to use your prior deals as precedent for what your organization will and will not do in future deals.

The working group encouraged marketers to align compensation structures with campaign objectives whenever possible. Different goals may warrant different compensation approaches. Awareness campaigns, commerce-focused programs, affiliate partnerships, and long-term ambassador relationships may each benefit from distinct compensation models. Establishing alignment between objectives and incentives can help improve performance while reducing inefficiencies.

[3]Affiliate commissions: Creators earn a percentage of sales generated through their unique tracking links or promo codes.

6. INFLUENCER COMPENSATION

Transparency emerged as a key area of concern. Marketers should seek visibility into creator compensation, agency fees, production costs, and other financial arrangements whenever possible. Often marketers have limited visibility into how fees are allocated throughout the creator ecosystem. That is similar to the limited visibility marketers have in the programmatic media supply chain. When multiple agencies, talent representatives, management organizations, and production partners are involved, understanding how the money flows can be difficult. Lack of transparency can make it challenging to evaluate efficiency, compare alternatives, and identify opportunities for optimization. This challenge can be further compounded when marketers are not directly involved in creator negotiations or have limited visibility into the financial arrangements supporting creator partnerships. As Scalable's Jasmine Enberg noted, "You can't calculate ROI if you don't understand the costs." Greater transparency enables more informed decision-making and helps organizations evaluate the efficiency of their investments.

7. BRIEFING INFLUENCERS

As is the case with any creative endeavor, briefing is a critical step in the influencer marketing process. Great work starts with a strong brief.

Respondents to the ANA survey ranked creative briefing of influencers as one of the most important steps in the influencer marketing process. Only selecting influencers and vetting influencers ranked higher.

A strong brief is the art of sacrifice, the discipline of clarity, and the spark of inspiration, all rolled into one — grounded in governance, alignment, and a shared understanding that keeps teams focused and accountable. It's not just a tool; it's a strategic act of leadership that can make or break a campaign.

In 2025, ANA released "**Better Creative Briefs for Better Brand Building**." Although that was developed as guidance for briefing traditional advertising, the key insights behind that work also apply to influencer marketing.

- Per ANA research, "A tight brief with clearly defined objectives" was rated as the top enabler for the achievement of great creative work by the respondent base of 914 client-side and agency senior executives who were judges for ANA awards programs.
- Meanwhile, "Poor creative briefs, lacking in focus and clarity" was rated as the top roadblock by both client and agency judges by a wide margin.

It's illuminating that briefs are both the top enabler and roadblock of creative work.

Specifically for influencer marketing, once creators have been selected and vetted, marketers (or agencies on their behalf) must communicate campaign objectives, expectations, deliverables, and requirements. While briefing is often viewed as an administrative step within the influencer marketing process, the working group discussions repeatedly highlighted its strategic importance.

Briefs serve as the foundation for content development, influencing not only the quality of creator output but also the efficiency of campaign execution, approval processes, and ultimately campaign performance — enabling co-creation within clear guardrails that balance creative freedom with brand integrity and strategic intent.

Creators are really effective at developing high quality creative content, but when that doesn't occur, usually one of two things happened:

- They were not briefed about what the brand needed.
- They were overly prescriptively briefed, with rules like "the brand logo needs to be in this corner," "You have to use the brand colors. You need to make sure you use this tagline." That's an ad and it's no longer communicating anything novel to their audiences.

7. BRIEFING INFLUENCERS

A recurring theme throughout the working group discussions was the challenge of balancing structure and flexibility. Marketers understandably want to communicate key messages, protect brand interests, and establish campaign requirements. However, creators emphasized that overly prescriptive briefing can undermine the authenticity that makes creator content effective in the first place.

Multiple experts also identified overly prescriptive briefing as a significant source of waste. Brands sometimes attempt to control every aspect of content development, including language, visuals, delivery methods, and creative execution.

The Virzi Triplets explained that some marketers approach influencer marketing as though they are producing traditional commercials, providing extensive creative direction that leaves little room for creator input. As a result, creators may be asked to produce content that feels disconnected from their normal style, audience expectations, and platform behaviors. The Virzi Triplets noted that creator content and traditional advertising serve different purposes and often require different approaches. Hiring creators because of their unique voice and then restricting that voice can diminish the value of the partnership. The Virzi Triplets noted that "the best briefs communicate clearly and are thorough — specifying guidelines, guardrails, deliverables. Realistic but thorough briefs are best." Establishing these expectations upfront can help minimize misunderstandings and reduce the need for costly revisions later in the process.

As Whalar Group noted, requirements such as "You have to use the brand colors; you need to make sure you use this tagline…" is when influencer creator content becomes an ad and it's no longer communicating anything novel to their audiences. While these requirements are often intended to protect the brand, they can lead to multiple rounds of revisions, delayed approvals, strained creator relationships, and content that ultimately performs poorly because it lacks authenticity.

There was general consensus that a good brief provides the following direction:

- Brand mentioned in audio
- Claim made
- Brand present in 5 seconds
- Close-up shot
- Hashtag included
- Call to action
- Disclosure of the creator's relationship with the brand

A survey respondent commented on the biggest opportunities to eliminate waste/optimize investment in influencer briefing:

> *"Properly briefed influencers can make a media plan work harder, but sloppy briefing can have the opposite effect."*

7. BRIEFING INFLUENCERS

Regarding disclosure, it is imperative that briefing includes guidelines for FTC compliance. Most fundamentally, creators need to provide proper disclosure of their relationship with the brand; the endorsement message should make it obvious when they have a relationship ("material connection") with the brand. And it's important that the disclosure is hard to miss. Learn more in the FTC document, "**Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers**."

The discussions also highlighted the importance of communicating campaign objectives clearly. Creators may receive detailed deliverable requirements without understanding the broader goals of the campaign. Without this context, they may struggle to make informed creative decisions or optimize content for intended outcomes. Working group subject matter experts noted that creators often understand their audiences better than brands do, making it important to provide sufficient context and background, but also allow the creators flexibility in execution.

Several experts noted that briefing creators too late in the process can create unnecessary pressure. Organizations sometimes underestimate the time required for creators to review products, learn about brands, and develop authentic points of view. Rushed timelines can lead to lower-quality content, increased revisions, and less effective partnerships.

Similarly, treating briefing as a one-way communication process rather than a collaborative discussion can limit the value creators bring to the relationship. Some marketers provide extensive instructions but create little opportunity for creators to ask questions, offer feedback, or contribute strategic insights. In these situations, content may technically satisfy briefing requirements while failing to leverage the creator's understanding of their audience and platform.

The working group further highlighted the importance of internal alignment before creators receive briefs. Organizations can reduce delays and inefficiencies by ensuring that legal, compliance, media, agency, and brand stakeholders agree on campaign requirements before content development begins. Addressing disagreements internally is generally far more efficient than attempting to resolve them after creators have already produced content.

Other considerations:

- Clarify non-negotiables versus creative flex areas. Distinguishing between "must-haves" (e.g., legal language, product claims) and "open-to-interpretation" elements helps creators focus their creativity where it matters most while staying compliant.
- Ensure briefs are platform-native. Requirements should reflect the norms, formats, and best practices of each platform, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach that can lead to underperforming content.
- Account for operational feasibility. Briefs should realistically reflect timelines, production complexity, and creator bandwidth to avoid misalignment between expectations and what can actually be delivered at a high standard.
- Capture learnings and iterate. Effective organizations treat briefs as living inputs, refining them over time based on campaign performance, creator feedback, and evolving platform dynamics.

7. BRIEFING INFLUENCERS

Finally, effective briefing is not simply about communicating requirements. It is about establishing productive partnerships that allow creators and marketers to work toward shared objectives. Organizations that prioritize clarity, collaboration, and flexibility are often able to improve content quality while reducing unnecessary costs and delays.

“A great brief is the difference between talent guessing and talent creating. Done well, it brings guidance, guardrails, and governance together to turn confusion into clarity, making content direction a true collaboration. You know you’ve done a good job when the brief disappears into the work, and all that’s left is great content.”

— SHANNON GOLDBERG, SENIOR DIRECTOR, ENTERTAINMENT AND INFLUENCER MARKETING, ALSAC, THE FUNDRAISING AND AWARENESS ORGANIZATION FOR ST. JUDE CHILDREN’S RESEARCH HOSPITAL

St. Jude Children's® Research Hospital

VI. DETAILED FINDINGS

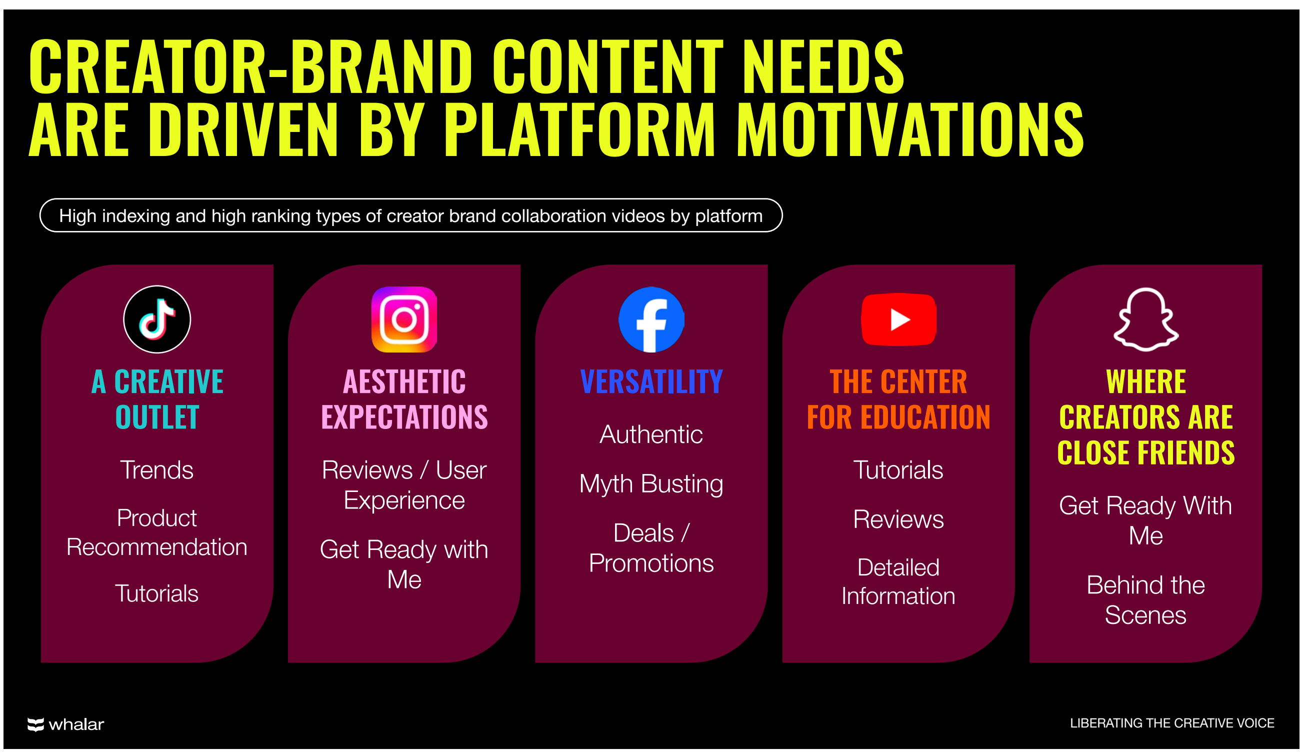
8. PLATFORM-SPECIFIC CONTENT

Creators today operate across a diverse ecosystem that includes TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, podcasts, and more. Throughout the working group discussions, experts repeatedly emphasized that creator content performs best when it feels native to the platform on which it appears. Consumers engage differently with content on TikTok than they do on YouTube. Podcast audiences consume content differently than Instagram audiences. Platform algorithms reward different behaviors, content formats, and engagement patterns.

One of the most common sources of waste discussed throughout the working group was the tendency to treat all platforms the same, developing a single creative asset and distributing that across multiple channels. While this approach may initially appear efficient from a production perspective, experts noted that it often results in content that feels unnatural within platform environments and performs poorly relative to platform-native alternatives. Instead, marketers should have platform-specific content strategies that reflect how audiences interact with creators in different environments.

According to Whaler:

- 86 percent of people follow creators on multiple platforms and 57 percent are expecting unique content by platform.
- Each of the platforms fulfills a unique need for the audiences which matters greatly and may serve different roles within the customer journey.



Source: Whalar

VI. DETAILED FINDINGS

8. PLATFORM-SPECIFIC CONTENT

Marketers face a growing challenge: determining how content should be developed for different environments while maintaining efficiency, consistency, and effectiveness. Organizations that lack an understanding of platform-specific best practices may struggle to evaluate content appropriately, resulting in poor creative decisions and missed opportunities.

Briefs should be platform-native. Requirements should reflect the norms, formats, and best practices of each platform, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach that can lead to underperforming content.

A recurring recommendation involved relying more heavily on creator expertise. Creators often possess deep understandings of audience expectations, platform algorithms, and content formats.

Ultimately, platform-specific content is not simply a creative consideration. It is an investment optimization strategy. Organizations that develop content aligned with platform behaviors, audience expectations, and creator strengths are generally better positioned to maximize performance while reducing waste.

9. CONTENT PRODUCTION

The influencers have been selected and vetted. Contractual terms have been agreed to. The influencers have been briefed, and content development direction is clear. The creators have been given the go-ahead to "make magic." Now it's time for content production. But this is exactly where modern influencer marketing campaigns often quietly derail.

Content production has evolved significantly with the growth of influencer marketing. Historically, many creator partnerships involved relatively simple content formats, often produced independently by creators using limited resources. Today, creators are increasingly producing more sophisticated content across a growing range of formats, including short- and long-form video, video podcasts, livestreaming, social commerce experiences, and creator-led entertainment. As creator marketing has developed, content production complexity has increased as well as the production requirements supporting those activities.

Content production can become a source of waste when marketers underestimate the resources, time, and coordination required to bring campaigns to life. When scaling a program to dozens or hundreds of creators without upgrading the production infrastructure, minor inefficiencies will quickly compound into delayed timelines and bloated budgets. Unlike traditional media placement, creator marketing often requires a customized production process for each creator partnership. Campaigns may involve product shipments, content capture, editing, approvals, platform-specific formatting, reshoots, and coordination across multiple stakeholders. If these requirements are not fully anticipated during planning, timelines can extend and costs can increase.

Organizations do not always account for the operational workload associated with managing content production of large creator programs. Campaigns involving dozens or even hundreds of creators can require significant coordination for content collection, approvals, asset management, usage rights tracking, performance monitoring, and creator communications. As programs scale, seemingly minor inefficiencies can compound quickly, slowing execution and increasing costs.

The growing professionalization of creators themselves was also highlighted. Many creators now operate as small businesses, supported by managers, agents, editors, production teams, and other partners. While these capabilities can improve content quality and expand creative possibilities, they can also introduce additional complexity and costs.

Ultimately, content production should be viewed not simply as the act of creating content, but as a broader strategic process requiring planning, coordination, and resource management. As creator marketing continues to expand across formats and platforms, organizations that fail to account for production complexity will likely encounter longer timelines, operational inefficiencies, and increased costs that reduce the overall effectiveness of creator investments.

9. CONTENT PRODUCTION

To manage this, APR categorizes influencer content into three distinct production approaches:

Approach	Typical Setup	Vibe	Ideal Brand Fit
DIY Style	Smartphone, ring light, basic apps	Raw, highly relatable	Nano/micro creators; lifestyle and beauty
Semi-Pro	DSLR cameras, audio gear, editing software	Polished, intentional	Mid-tier to macro; tech demos and tutorials
Full Team	Camera crew, stylists, set designers	Premium, branded	Top-tier/celebrity; multi-channel campaigns

Throughout the working group discussions, experts emphasized the importance of aligning production requirements with business objectives. Not every creator activation requires the same level of production support, and marketers should carefully evaluate where additional production resources are likely to create meaningful value. APR suggests that marketers should "ensure the fee is aligned to production standards," e.g., studio shot with professional equipment versus smartphone. According to APR, to scale effectively and protect your investments, organizations must treat influencer content as a strategic supply chain. They offered the following blueprint for strategic creator production:

A. **Demand cost transparency.** Do not accept lump sums. Request full transparency on overall influencer costs, strictly broken out by talent fees versus production costs (as well as agency fees). This visibility allows organizations to understand exactly where their resources are going and evaluate whether the production investments (like hiring a crew or renting gear) are actually generating proportionate business value.

B. **Establish ironclad production guidelines.** Every brand needs step-by-step production guidelines for onboarding creators and external partners. Because many influencers are relatively new to formal advertising compliance, these guidelines serve as a critical safety net.

   - **Define the non-negotiables.** Clearly outline your quality control standards, approval workflows, and brand "must-haves" and "no-no's."
   - **Manage licensing risk.** Unlicensed music or recognizable background art represents a massive legal vulnerability. Demand paperwork for all licensed materials upfront.
   - **Watch for compliance.** A simple oversight — like a creator wearing a hat with a competitor's logo — can ruin a shoot and lead to immediate investment loss.

C. **Avoid the "traditional commercial" trap.** When brands invest heavily in production, there is a temptation to treat the creator like an actor in a traditional TV spot. That is a mistake. Creator content and traditional advertising serve entirely different purposes. Forcing a creator to produce content that feels disconnected from their normal style or platform behaviors strips away the exact authenticity you paid for.

9. CONTENT PRODUCTION

D. Build operational infrastructure. As programs scale, you cannot manage hundreds of assets via email chains. Brands must invest in operational infrastructure: centralized asset libraries (i.e., a digital asset management solution), workflow management platforms, and standardized quality assurance processes. This reduces the administrative burden and allows marketing teams to seamlessly handle product fulfillment, editing rounds, and usage rights tracking.

Several experts highlighted the importance of planning for production needs early in the campaign development process. Production requirements often extend beyond the act of content creation and may include product fulfillment, editing, asset management, approvals, distribution planning, and coordination of the various stakeholders. Establishing realistic timelines and clearly defining production expectations upfront can help reduce delays, minimize unexpected costs, and improve execution efficiency.

As creator marketing programs continue to grow, marketers may also benefit from investing in an operational infrastructure that supports content production at scale. Technology platforms, workflow management tools, centralized asset libraries, and standardized production processes can help reduce administrative burden while improving consistency across campaigns. Those capabilities become increasingly important as marketers work with larger numbers of creators across multiple formats and platforms.

The working group also discussed the importance of strategic evaluation of emerging content formats. While opportunities such as video podcasts, livestreaming, social commerce activations, and creator-led entertainment continue to gain momentum, marketers should assess whether the additional production investments required are aligned with campaign objectives and expected returns. Organizations that evaluate production requirements alongside potential business outcomes are generally better positioned to allocate resources effectively.

Production values in influencer content have been increasing. A common theme is “upping the game” from a quality and content perspective, and brands are emphasizing that quality. In order to improve production values, external partners are often required. Influencers can reach the ceiling of their capabilities and may need external partners to improve the quality of their content. Growth toward a more professional and polished look creates risks and has certain outcomes attached to it, so quality issues can lead to investment loss, which means clients scrap content after it’s been produced and delivered because it doesn’t match or align with the expectation of quality that a brand is looking for.

Ultimately, the discussions suggested that successful content production is not necessarily about producing more content or more elaborate content. Rather, it is about allocating production resources intentionally, establishing scalable processes, and ensuring that production investments are aligned with broader business objectives. Organizations that approach content production strategically are generally better positioned to improve efficiency, control costs, and maximize the value of creator marketing investments.

9. CONTENT PRODUCTION

Looking ahead, the landscape is shifting rapidly. According to APR, we are currently seeing the dominance of nano influencers, the rise of livestreaming as a preferred format, and the growing integration of AI into campaign management. However, just because a new format exists doesn't mean it requires a massive production budget. Successful content production isn't about making more content or even more elaborate content. It is about allocating resources intentionally. Organizations that evaluate their production requirements alongside their actual business outcomes will consistently maximize the value of their creator investments.

CASE STUDY: MACK TRUCKS AND STEIN

USING A B2B INFLUENCER TO PROVIDE THIRD-PARTY VALIDATION THAT TRADITIONAL ADVERTISING COULD NEVER ACHEIVE

Business Challenge

Mack Trucks faced a critical perception challenge in the long-haul market. Despite strong product capabilities, there was skepticism that Mack could deliver a truly competitive long-haul experience, particularly when it came to driver comfort. In an industry defined by driver shortages, retention challenges, and long hours spent living on the road, comfort has become a decisive factor for fleets and owner-operators. It is also one of the hardest benefits to credibly prove through traditional marketing.

The launch of the new Mack Pioneer presented a breakthrough opportunity: move beyond product claims and prove Mack's "comfort" pillar in a way drivers could genuinely trust and feel. This was not just an activation brief; it was an opportunity to change the conversation around the brand entirely.

The primary objective was to reposition Mack as a credible, premium, highly desirable long-haul option by putting the driver's experience at the center of the launch. The activation targeted long-haul drivers, owner-operators, fleet decision makers, and trucking enthusiasts in an authentic, real-world environment, meeting them where they already travel and rest.

Insights and Strategy

Research showed that while Mack had strong credentials in uptime, safety, and fuel efficiency, it faced a persistent perception barrier: buyers were not convinced Mack truly understood what long-haul drivers value most. Industry insights pointed to the core truth that drivers feel undervalued, even though they spend long hours living inside their trucks. The strategy identified comfort as the lead messaging platform. The key insight: comfort is not a feature, but a sign of respect. By translating the brand essence into a tangible, driver-first experience, Mack was reinforced as a brand that understands drivers' realities.

CASE STUDY: MACK TRUCKS AND STEIN

USING A B2B INFLUENCER TO PROVIDE THIRD-PARTY VALIDATION THAT TRADITIONAL ADVERTISING COULD NEVER ACHEIVE

Concept/Big Idea

The big idea was the "Mack Hotel" — something that had never been done before. No truck manufacturer had ever literally transformed a truck into a luxury hotel experience. The concept was rooted in a simple but powerful truth: for long-haul drivers, the truck is not just a vehicle, it is a workplace, a living space, and often a temporary home. Driver-related concerns such as comfort, fatigue, retention, and quality of life outweigh nearly every other issue facing fleets today. So rather than telling drivers the Pioneer was comfortable, the brand invited them to stay in it. Mack Hotel transformed the Pioneer into a fully immersive luxury hotel experience at Kenly 95 in North Carolina, one of the most popular and authentic truck stops in the country, meeting drivers exactly where they already were. By turning a familiar stop into an unexpected hospitality moment, drivers were invited to slow down, recharge, and experience comfort firsthand — reframing the truck from a piece of equipment into a space designed around the driver.

Activation/Tactics

The Mack Hotel activation was executed in two phases: an in-person experience followed by a digital amplification campaign.

Phase one brought the concept to life at the Kenly 95 truck stop. The Mack Pioneer was transformed into a full luxury hotel experience — complete with premium bedding, hospitality amenities like a salon, massage therapist, gourmet meal and coffee bar, and thoughtful interior details that showcased the truck's comfort features in a way no spec sheet ever could.

Phase two launched with a comprehensive digital campaign. A hero video showcasing the Mack Hotel experience was distributed across Mack's social channels — YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, Threads, and X — through both organic and paid media, with a specific objective of driving social engagement on emerging B2B platforms like TikTok.

To amplify the activation, Mack partnered with influential trucking creator **Chris Kuna**. As a respected voice in the trucking community with significant reach across social platforms, Kuna experienced Mack Hotel firsthand and created multiple authentic pieces of content documenting his stay, lending credibility to Mack's comfort claims through a trusted peer voice.

Rather than using Kuna as a spokesperson to deliver the message, he was invited to authentically experience what was built and share his genuine reaction. His content was not scripted or polished; it was real, and that authenticity resonated powerfully with his audience.

Results

Mack Hotel was integral to a broader brand-to-demand strategy that delivered a 28 percent

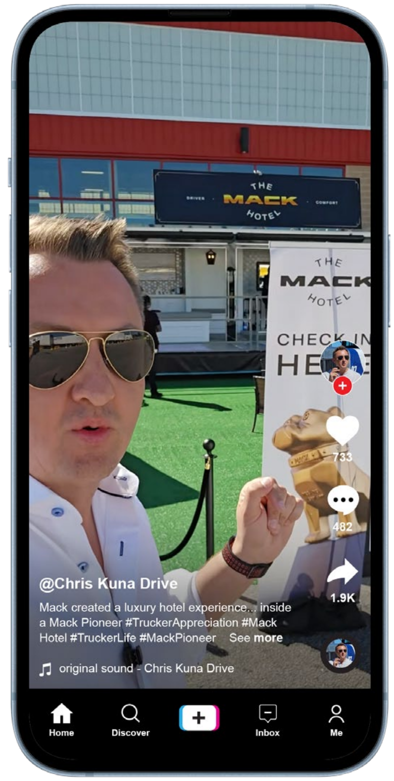
CASE STUDY: MACK TRUCKS AND STEIN

USING A B2B INFLUENCER TO PROVIDE THIRD-PARTY VALIDATION THAT TRADITIONAL ADVERTISING COULD NEVER ACHEIVE

increase in year-to-year market share — the largest gain in more than 20 years. The campaign's digital performance was equally striking. Mack Hotel content drove a 129 percent increase in average engagement rate and an average click-through rate 10 times higher than Mack's historical benchmark — across all channels.

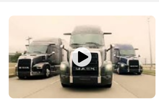
Mack Hotel content drove 84 percent more engagement than all other Mack content combined. Platform performance exceeded every expectation. Facebook was the standout, with engagement surging 585 percent and an 11.33 percent engagement rate. TikTok impressions rose 471 percent, validating the strategy to activate this emerging B2B channel and reach a new generation of drivers and owner operators where they already spend time. LinkedIn and YouTube further extended the campaign's reach among fleet decision-makers and industry professionals.

The influencer partnership amplified the campaign's reach to Kuna's 948K-plus followers across social platforms, delivering authentic peer-to-peer credibility that traditional advertising could not replicate. Tellingly, 91 percent of long-haul drivers who previously wouldn't consider a Mack Pioneer would after exposure to the campaign. Together, these results demonstrate that Mack Hotel didn't just perform as a campaign — it fundamentally shifted brand perception and drove measurable commercial impact.



The influencer partnership with Kuna was critical to accelerating brand growth. In B2B trucking, in which peer recommendations and authentic voices carry significant weight, Kuna's endorsement provided third-party validation that traditional advertising could never achieve. His content reached hundreds of thousands of drivers and industry professionals who trust his perspective, effectively extending Mack's reach into communities that might be skeptical of manufacturer claims.

In B2B, the right influencer is not the biggest name but the most trusted voice within your target community. Kuna's authentic experience and organic content creation delivered more credibility than traditional advertising could achieve, proving that peer validation drives belief in skeptical industries.



The "Welcome to the Mack Hotel" video can be seen **here**.

B2 AWARDS

This campaign was recognized in the ANA B2 Awards as a Silver winner in the Influencer category.

10. CONTENT APPROVAL/CLEARANCE

The approval process is a common source of inefficiency and waste, presenting opportunities to streamline. Influencer content often passes through multiple stakeholders before publication, including brand teams, legal departments, agencies, compliance groups, and media organizations. While oversight is important, excessive approval layers can slow campaign execution and reduce the timeliness of creator content.

When internal stakeholders are not aligned before content development begins, creators may later be forced to navigate contradictory requests that increase revision cycles and production costs. As mediasense put it, “It’s crucial to define everyone’s role in the process to avoid overlapping in the thinking, strategy, and execution.” Without clear ownership and alignment, organizations may expend significant time and resources managing internal complexity rather than focusing on campaign effectiveness. Organizations should periodically evaluate whether approval workflows remain appropriate for creator content. Conflicting stakeholder feedback presents an additional challenge. One stakeholder may prioritize compliance, another branding, and another audience engagement. Influencer marketing often moves faster than traditional advertising and may require more agile review structures.

What is the clearance process?

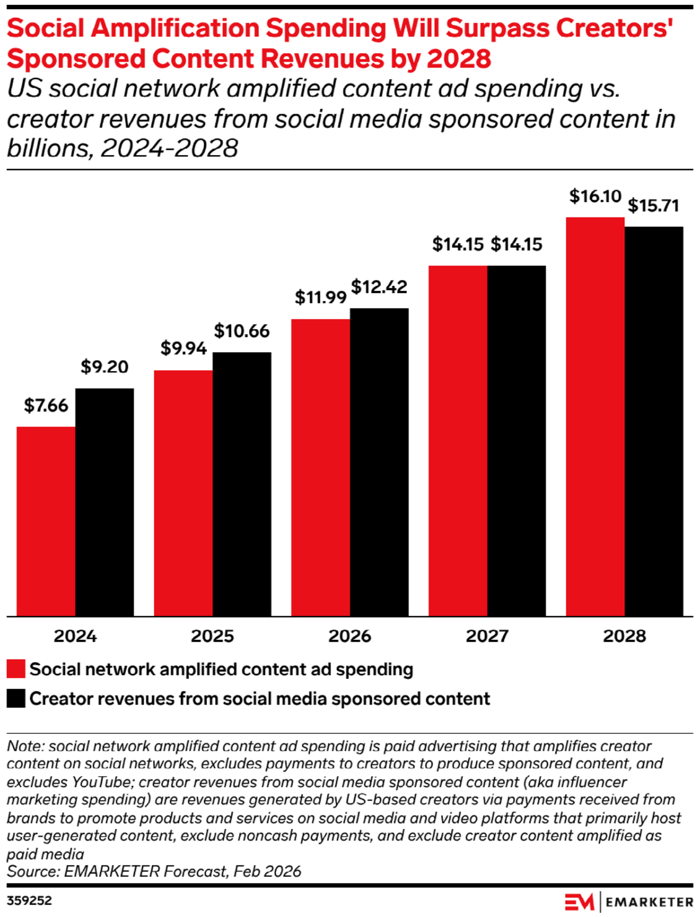
- Establish who is reviewing and clearing materials before they are posted, ensuring no clearance concerns remain. Because this process is manual, clear assignment of responsibility is essential.
- Verify that content is posted as approved and that disclosures appear as required.

Other considerations:

- Compliance training both internally and with the content creator can help the process run smoothly. Ensuring that all parties understand content guardrails, such as necessary disclosures, IP considerations, and claim substantiation requirements, can help the process run more smoothly.
- Turnaround time from influencers: Leave sufficient time for revisions if the content does not meet expectations.
- Scheduling and date alignment: Lock down posting dates as early as possible in the deal terms.
    - If initial deal terms include only a general time frame, finalize exact posting dates as soon as possible.

11. PAID AMPLIFICATION OF INFLUENCER CONTENT

Paid amplification of influencer marketing is experiencing a significant shift. According to a February 2026 forecast from EMARKETER, U.S. social network amplified content ad spending is projected to match creator sponsored content revenues at $14.15B in 2027 and will surpass creator sponsored content revenues in 2028. This marks a pivotal crossover point, indicating that brands are increasingly prioritizing the amplification of creator content — using paid media to boost influencer posts — over direct payments to creators for sponsored content alone. The gap is expected to continue to grow.



Source: EMARKETER

A key reason that paid media has taken off with marketers is because it helps solve or fill in some of the measurement gaps. Paid media gives marketers a better way to measure ROI. According to one of the subject matter experts, “Paid media is a more comfortable place for a lot of brands to be. They understand paid media. They don’t really understand influencer marketing in the same way.”

11. PAID AMPLIFICATION OF INFLUENCER CONTENT

The perspective that paid media gives marketers a better way to measure ROI is supported by work from CreatorIQ where “boosting creator posts” (i.e., paid media) is the top activity for driving ROI.

Source: CreatorIQ

Guidance for the allocation between influencer content and paid amplification, according to Influential, is:

- **For awareness:** 30 percent paid and 70 percent native
- **For conversion:** 70 percent paid versus 30 percent native

11. PAID AMPLIFICATION OF INFLUENCER CONTENT

Finally, as noted in the section on contracting influencers, one of the most frequently discussed sources of waste is the failure to secure appropriate content rights upfront. If organizations anticipate using creator content for paid media amplification, social amplification, website placement, retail media activations, email marketing, or other purposes, those rights should be negotiated before campaigns launch. Waiting until content has already proven successful shifts negotiating leverage to the creator and can result in substantially higher costs. Securing these rights early can help avoid costly renegotiations and maximize the value of high-performing creator content across multiple channels.

Survey respondents commented on the biggest opportunities to eliminate waste/optimize investment in paid media amplification:

“Maximize content utilization. We invest significantly in creator-generated content, but there is an opportunity to extend its value through broader usage across paid social, CRM, retail channels, dealer communications, website content, and sales enablement materials. Getting more mileage from top-performing assets improves ROI without increasing creator spending.”

“Negotiating usage rights upfront and repurposing high-performing creator content across paid, owned, and earned channels can significantly increase the value generated from each partnership.”

CASE STUDY: THE KRAFT HEINZ COMPANY AND CASHMERE AGENCY (EXTERNAL AGENCY) AND THE KITCHEN (IN-HOUSE AGENCY)

TURNING THE CLASSIC INFLUENCER PLAYBOOK UPSIDE DOWN

Business Challenge

While Heinz Ketchup is a cultural and household staple, Heinz Mustard never enjoyed the same affinity. The goal was clear: turn Heinz Mustard from a grocery store afterthought into a conversation-driving, culturally resonant staple.

The campaign set out to engage young, multicultural millennials and gen Z consumers whom Heinz has struggled to reach in the past. These consumers are digitally native, culturally aware, and highly attuned to moments that blend entertainment, food, and social influence. This audience is skeptical of inauthentic brand partnerships that attempt to co-opt culture but are quick to reward authentic brand moves that show cultural fluency. Many are deeply immersed in hip-hop, meme culture, and sports, and love a brand that can speak their language without trying too hard.

Insights and Strategy

Most influencer campaigns are built around reach. This one was built around respect.

The insight: Today's audiences have become increasingly skeptical of transactional partnerships. They respond to relationships grounded in shared values and authentic fandom.

Kraft Heinz's IMPACT team (Inclusive Marketing, Partnerships & Culture), along with culture agency partner Cashmere, identified DJ Mustard as more than a celebrity with cultural influence. He embodied the same key value that has defined Heinz for more than 150 years: mastery. Both became iconic by relentlessly pursuing excellence in one craft and going all in on what they love.

That shared philosophy became the strategic foundation for the partnership. DJ Mustard's love of Heinz Mustard had been visible across social media for years. Heinz approached him as genuine fans of his creative excellence, and he was already a genuine fan of the brand. That reciprocal fandom made the partnership feel earned from day one. Recognizing a shared value and giving audiences a reason to celebrate two icons resulted in a partnership in which people chose to invest because it reflected something they already believed.

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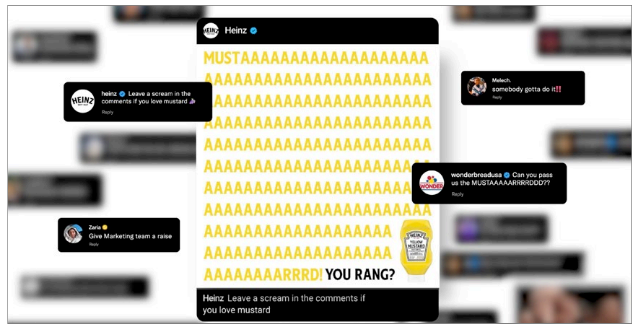
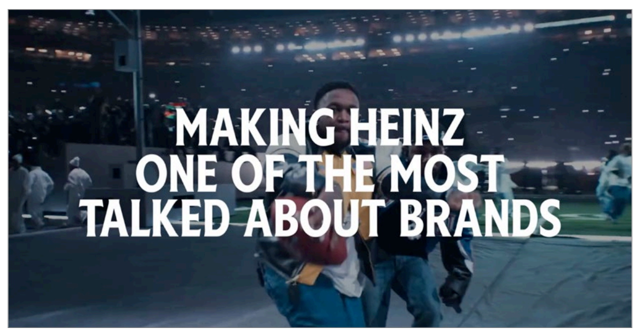
Concept/Big Idea

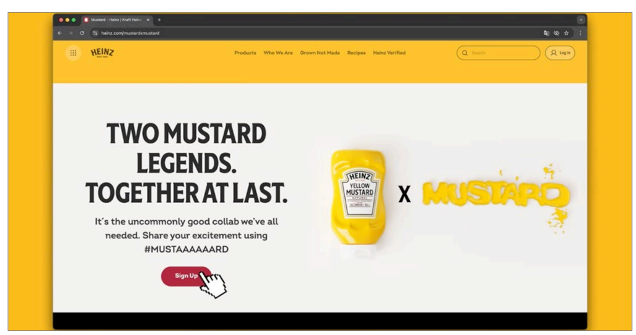
"Mustard x Mustard": two mustard legends, together at last. Mustard x Mustard turned the classic influencer playbook upside down. DJ Mustard wasn't "signed on" — he was in the driver's seat. He wasn't merely the face of content — he was co-producing every cultural reference point, from flavor to fan dialogue. The success was simple: pair a legendary brand with a living legend who shares not only its name but also its enthusiasm for the product. The partnership had depth: DJ Mustard brought tone, flavor, and braggadocio. This was not a name-drop. It was name activation. Heinz Mustard made the campaign about his influence, not his face. The humor and hype were his, and the fans were on his side — not because someone told them to, but because they wanted to be. In a world where influencers are everywhere, Mustard stood out because he meant it. And that was what cut through.

Activation/Tactics

The campaign was launched with a cultural mic-drop: a fake Heinz Ketchup ad that aired directly after DJ Mustard's Grammy win, only to flip halfway through the ad to the "Mustaaaard" reveal. Fans were stunned — and hooked. The unexpectedness mirrored DJ Mustard's own creative style: bold, unfiltered, and totally his. Then, Heinz Mustard handed him the reins. As Chief Mustard Officer, he rolled out teasers on his channels — Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube — and shared memes that felt







CASE STUDY: THE KRAFT HEINZ COMPANY AND CASHMERE AGENCY (EXTERNAL AGENCY) AND THE KITCHEN (IN-HOUSE AGENCY)

TURNING THE CLASSIC INFLUENCER PLAYBOOK UPSIDE DOWN

straight from his group chat, and showed up in storytelling that reflected his voice, not a brand script. Digital out of home placements in his hometown of Inglewood grounded the campaign in his roots, while flavor development gave fans something tangible to taste, literally. The brand activated across social with custom hashtags, snackable memes, vertical video, and surprise drops that felt like album releases. It was DJ Mustard's world — Heinz Mustard just let the brand live in it. This wasn't just influencer marketing. This was influencer ownership. And the results proved that when influence comes from authenticity, the audience doesn't scroll past — they show up.

Results

In a year defined by rap feuds and meme culture, Heinz Mustard didn't just join the conversation — it became the conversation. Rather than forcing an ad into the zeitgeist, the brand fanned the flames of a viral moment, transforming Heinz Mustard from an afterthought into a brand people actually cared about. The campaign's cultural relevance was cemented when Heinz Mustard was spoofed on Saturday Night Live — a moment that proved it had transcended advertising and become a true part of pop culture. It set the brand and partnership up for a successful retail product drop to come at the upcoming summer grilling season.

Proudest Achievement Related to the Work

The proudest achievement was bringing the Heinz x DJ Mustard product to life — and watching fans flock to grab it when it dropped. After months of teasing, hijacking headlines, and owning second screens, the most rewarding moment was finally delivering what everyone had been waiting for: the official mustard, remixed by Mustard. What made this so meaningful was how creative, strategic, PR, and agency partners all came together — aligned in trust, timing, and taste — to tap into culture in an effortless but intentional way. Heinz Mustard maintained momentum from a viral lyric to a retail shelf, keeping fans engaged, curious, and hungry the entire time. The buzz was real. The flavor was real. And the cultural payoff? Even better than imagined.

This campaign was recognized in the ANA 2025 Multicultural Excellence Awards as a Gold winner in the Influencer Marketing category.

12. AGENCY COMPENSATION

In February 2026, the ANA released "**Influencer Marketing Agency Compensation**" based on a survey of ANA client-side members. Key highlights of the report are:

- Only half of the respondents have full visibility into the exact payment amounts provided to influencers; many also do not have full visibility into agency compensation.
- Among those with transparency, the allocation of spending between agency services and talent varied widely and averaged 30 percent for agency services and 70 percent for talent.
- Respondents were asked, "Does your agency employ non-transparent compensation methods for your influencer/creator marketing services?" and examples were provided. There were 39 percent of respondents replying "no." Meanwhile, 31 percent responded "yes" and the remaining 30 percent "don't know." It is likely that those who don't know have agencies that employ non-transparent compensation methods.
- When asked to comment on non-transparent compensation arrangements, representative open-ended responses were:
    - "Agency will not disclose exact influencer fees nor will they give the ratio of agency fees to influencer fees."
    - "The influencers are purchased in a non-transparent fashion. We pay one fee for influencers and agency fee. We don't know what we pay for influencers."
- One-quarter (25 percent) are very satisfied with their current agency compensation agreements for influencer marketing; another 48 percent are somewhat satisfied. The remainder (27 percent) are either not very satisfied or not at all satisfied.
- For those somewhat satisfied, not very satisfied, and not at all satisfied, the lack of transparency was the key issue. The lack of industry benchmarks was also mentioned multiple times.
- More than half are likely to change their current compensation approach in the next 12 months. Reasons for doing so via open-ended responses were about transparency, followed by the likelihood of moving influencer marketing in-house.

As the report pointed out, there are parallels between current influencer agency compensation practices and principal media.

- Historically, an agency acted as an agent/fiduciary for its clients, buying media transparently and fully disclosing the cost of the media from the seller. Now, with principal media, the agency acquires the media with its own funds and then resells that media to clients without disclosing the original purchase price. Clients therefore don't know the agency markup/profit.
- Today, in influencer marketing, many of the compensation arrangements are not transparent. The client does not know the allocation between fees paid to the influencer talent and fees paid to the agency. Therefore, as in principal media, the client does not know the agency markup/profit.

12. AGENCY COMPENSATION

The report provided practical guidance for marketers seeking clearer value exchange and more confidence in their influencer marketing agency compensation arrangements.

- Marketers working with external agencies for their influencer marketing need to understand the transparency (or lack thereof) of the compensation agreements with those agencies. Marketers who value fee transparency should ask for it up front and require it as a condition of partnership in their services agreement. Furthermore, marketers must have internal alignment on their tolerance for non-transparent compensation structures should they exist with their respective agencies.
- Visibility into contracts, transparency around creator fees, and fee splits between agencies and talent varied immensely among survey respondents. Knowing what matters to you and negotiating terms accordingly with agency partners is key. This may include disclosure of any markups or bundled pricing structures. Transparency should always be documented contractually and never assumed.
- Wherever possible, marketers should seek a clear separation between agency compensation and influencer talent payments. Itemized fee structures enable more informed decision-making, support benchmarking, and allow marketers to assess the value delivered by agency services compared with the value delivered by creators. Note that for many respondents, (a) agencies bundled the talent and agency compensation fees or (b) agencies only provided the total amount paid to all talent used for a campaign, not the individual amounts paid to each creator. If knowing the exact amounts paid to creators is important, that should be negotiated upfront.

A survey respondent commented on the biggest opportunities to eliminate waste/optimize investment in influencer agency compensation:

“*The influencer marketing agencies need to be more transparent about their operating costs and what amount goes directly to the creators.*”

VI. DETAILED FINDINGS

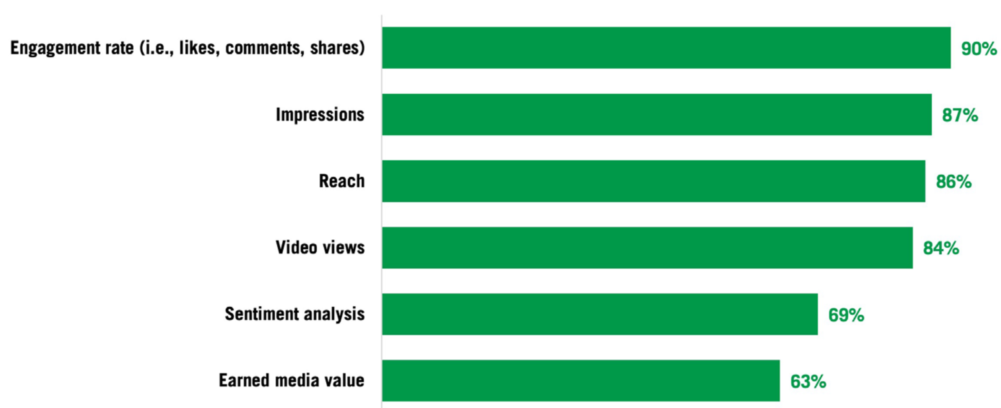
13. MEASUREMENT

While every stage of the influencer marketing process contributes to campaign success, the working group repeatedly identified measurement as an area where marketers face the greatest challenges and opportunities. In our survey to ANA client-side marketer members about the steps in the influencer marketing process, measurement was rated as the most difficult step as well as one of the most important.

Historically, influencer marketing has been criticized for its perceived lack of accountability, with marketers relying heavily on engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares to evaluate performance. To a large extent, this is still true today. ANA's "**Influencer Marketing Agency Compensation**" study, released in February 2026, reported on KPIs for influencer marketing and was based on a survey to client-side marketers. The study found engagement at the top of the list, followed by impressions and reach. Purchase intent as well as conversion/sales were towards the bottom.

KPIs (Top-2 Box)

Base: 69



Q. What are your KPIs for influencer/creator marketing? Rate on a scale of 1–5 where 1 = Not at all important and 5 = Very important.

KPIs rated < 50% were: Click-through rate (49%), Post count (Number of posts about brand (42%), Purchase intent (38%), Conversions, sales (32%), Sign-ups/downloads (17%).

A recurring concern in our discussions involved the industry's continued reliance on vanity metrics. While likes, comments, shares, and video views can provide useful indicators of audience engagement, multiple experts cautioned against treating these metrics as primary measures of success.

13. MEASUREMENT

As influencer marketing spending has grown, expectations regarding measurement are evolving. Increasingly, marketers expect creator programs to demonstrate business impact, including awareness, consideration, commerce outcomes, sales, customer acquisition, and broader marketing effectiveness.

Throughout the discussions, experts consistently pointed out that measurement should not be viewed as an activity that occurs after a campaign concludes. Rather, measurement should guide decision-making throughout the influencer marketing process. Creator selection, briefing, content development, media activation, and optimization decisions all benefit from effective measurement frameworks. Despite some progress, the working group repeatedly found that measurement remains one of the largest sources of waste within influencer marketing.

One of the most common challenges discussed involved misalignment between campaign objectives and measurement frameworks. Jasmine Enberg of Scalable mentioned that many marketers struggle to determine whether influencer marketing investments are effective because they have not clearly defined what success looks like in the first place. Without established objectives, selecting appropriate KPIs becomes difficult and performance evaluation becomes inconsistent. As a result, marketers may struggle to determine if creator investments are delivering meaningful business value. Measurement frameworks should be built around business goals rather than platform metrics alone. Organizations that begin with such objectives are generally better positioned to select meaningful KPIs and evaluate performance accurately.

URL tagging and hashtags can provide important measurement intelligence.

- URL tagging in influencer marketing is the process of adding unique tracking codes to the end of a website link. Brands provide these customized links to individual creators so that web analytics tools can track exactly which creator, platform, and specific post generated website traffic, clicks, and sales.
- Hashtags help measure influencer marketing by acting as searchable text filters that allow brands to track campaign reach, community engagement, and user-generated content.

While URL tags measure private actions like clicks and sales, hashtags measure public visibility and conversation across social media platforms.

The working group also discussed the fragmentation of measurement approaches across organizations. Different brands, business units, agencies, creator platforms, and social platforms often utilize different KPIs, reporting methodologies, and attribution models. This inconsistency can make it difficult to compare performance, identify best practices, or allocate budgets effectively. Similarly, fragmented reporting frequently requires marketers to spend significant amounts of time reconciling data from multiple sources rather than analyzing performance and making strategic decisions.

13. MEASUREMENT

The growing complexity of the influencer ecosystem further complicates measurement efforts. Creator content may appear organically on social platforms, be amplified through paid media, support retail media initiatives, drive ecommerce activity, and contribute to broader brand-building efforts at the same time. Without integrated measurement frameworks, marketers may struggle to understand the full impact of creator activity.

Paid amplification has emerged as one of the most important opportunities for improving measurement. Several experts noted that while organic creator content can generate strong engagement, paid amplification often provides marketers with greater visibility into performance. Ryan Detert of Influential noted, "Creator marketing wasn't always measurable, but the amplification of creator content through paid media has enabled marketers to apply more rigorous measurement approaches." By placing media support behind creator content, marketers can access more robust reporting, apply audience targeting, conduct testing, and measure outcomes such as traffic, conversions, and sales more effectively. Detert added that measurement opportunities now extend beyond direct online purchases and app installations to include social commerce and even offline outcomes such as media tune-in and other business objectives. As a result, paid amplification can help organizations better understand which creator partnerships and content strategies are driving business results.

Marketing mix modeling (MMM) was another recurring topic. As influencer marketing spending continues to grow and measurement capabilities become more sophisticated, many organizations are integrating creator investments into the broader frameworks used to evaluate media effectiveness. Advancements in measurement and MMM integration now allow brands to evaluate creator performance alongside other marketing channels. While MMM is not without limitations, several participants noted that it can provide valuable insights into how creator marketing contributes to overall business and marketing performance.

Finally, measurement should function as a decision-making tool rather than a reporting exercise. Organizations that integrate measurement throughout the influencer marketing process are generally better positioned to identify inefficiencies, optimize investments, and maximize return on creator marketing spending.

A survey respondent commented on the biggest opportunities to eliminate waste/optimize investment in influencer marketing measurement:

> *"It comes down to measurement. Relying on follower count is a vanity metric that is costing us, but we don't have great measurement set up to be able to determine which indicators are more important than follower or engagement rate, so we are stuck using those as our initial judging criteria."*

13. MEASUREMENT

> “Measurement isn’t just about proving value — it’s about improving it. The best creator programs use measurement to inform decisions before, during, and after a campaign, but influencer marketing is uniquely nuanced because its value extends well beyond any single contracted post. We can measure engagement, reach, and even business impact more effectively than ever before, but some of the most meaningful outcomes — like the halo effect on the brand, deeper community conversation, and the organic advocacy that comes from trusted creator relationships — remain much harder to quantify. As our measurement capabilities continue to evolve, let’s not lose sight of those signals simply because they’re more difficult to track.”
>
> **— CARLEY CALDAS, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, MARKETING AND CREATIVE, eos**

SIDEBAR: AAM CREATOR AND INFLUENCER MARKETPLACE CERTIFICATION

A compliance audit program validating the operators of creator and influencer marketplaces

The **Alliance for Audited Media (AAM)** collaborates with the advertising industry to set standards and develop assurance programs that bring greater transparency to channels including digital, print, retail media, events, out-of-home, ad tech, and more. Interestingly, it was founded by the ANA in 1914, when it was then called the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC).

The AAM Creator and Influencer Marketplace Certification program provides independent verification of the marketplace operators, intermediaries, and social platforms that support creators and influencers. Rather than verifying the outcome of a single creator or post, the certification evaluates the underlying policies, processes, and controls used by the marketplace to support transparent, reliable campaign measurement.

By partnering with a certified marketplace, advertisers gain greater confidence that the data used to evaluate campaign performance is supported by independently verified processes and controls.

Certification Scope: Four Key Areas

AAM independently assesses the policies, processes, and controls that influence the quality, transparency, and reliability of data across four key areas.

1. **Onboarding, Vetting, and Audience Authenticity**
   AAM reviews the processes used to onboard, vet, and monitor creators to help ensure marketplace inventory meets quality standards. Areas reviewed include onboarding controls, eligibility criteria, creator identity verification, inauthenticity methodologies for identifying non-human and inflated-follower activity, content classification, alignment with marketplace policies, and ongoing re-vetting.

2. **Engagement Quality Evaluation**
   Campaign performance data is assessed to help ensure advertisers receive accurate and reliable reporting. This includes on- and off-platform engagement metrics, data sources, reporting methodologies, and the controls used to maintain data consistency, detect and resolve interruptions, and support accurate reporting.

3. **Analytics and Performance Verification**
   The certification examines the methods used to validate audience authenticity and engagement quality to help ensure campaign performance is supported by consistent, documented processes. Key elements include audience authentication methodologies, engagement quality validation, and the role of human review in evaluating performance and applying standardized procedures.

SIDEBAR: AAM CREATOR AND INFLUENCER MARKETPLACE CERTIFICATION

4. **Transparency, Disclosures, and Regulatory Compliance**
   The certification also assesses the policies, controls, and documentation that support transparent marketplace operations and compliance with applicable regulatory and industry requirements. The review encompasses creator disclosure and compliance processes, adherence to FTC and other applicable industry guidelines, ongoing monitoring of compliance activities, and documentation supporting marketplace claims through third-party verification, certifications, or attestations.

Certification Onboarding

To participate in the certification, the operator must complete a scoped assessment across the four key areas and provide supporting documentation. AAM reviews, evaluates, and tests the operator's policies, processes, and controls across these areas.

Measurement and Scoring

Each area of assessment is scored on three dimensions: documentation, consistency of application, and evidence of controls. The audit yields a pass, conditional (including a list of remediation items), or fail with a criteria-level scorecard. An annual program review and ongoing surveillance is required to maintain certification.

Activation

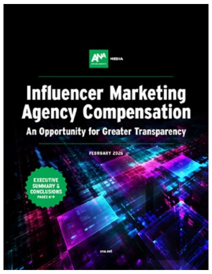
Once the certification is successfully completed, certified operators receive an AAM seal to include on their websites, marketing materials, and RFPs. Certified companies are also included on **AAM's Assurance List**, a directory of certified companies used by the industry to identify trusted partners. Learn more at **auditedmedia.com**.

Alliance for Audited Media

VII. APPENDIX

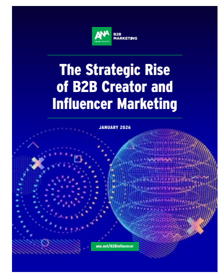
VII. APPENDIX

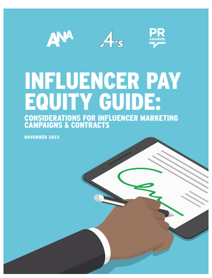
ADDITIONAL ANA RESOURCES



Influencer Marketing Agency Compensation (February 2026)
This research uncovers a landscape marked by a lack of compensation transparency, as only half of the respondents have full visibility into the exact payment amounts provided to influencers; many also do not have full visibility into agency compensation. Among those with transparency, the allocation of spending between agency services and talent varied widely and averaged 30 percent for agency services and 70 percent for talent. Marketers are increasingly reassessing their agency relationships, with over half likely to change their compensation approach in the coming year.

The Strategic Rise of B2B Creator and Influencer Marketing
(January 2026)
Influencer marketing has become a powerful force within B2B marketing. This paper shares comprehensive insights on the types of B2B influencers, examples of B2B influencer marketing, proposed best practices, and ways to minimize waste.





Influencer Pay Equity Guide (November 2023)
The ANA, 4As, and PR Council released this guide to address the lack of transparency and the 29 percent pay gap between white and BIPOC influencers. The guide offers an actionable roadmap for marketers committed to equitable compensation and greater transparency across every stage of partnership in the influencer industry.

The **ANA Creator and Influencer Marketing Committee** provides a forum for ANA members to address industry-wide challenges, better understand the latest trends and technologies, share creative influencer case studies, and collectively elevate each other's expertise. The committee meets approximately four times a year, either virtually or in-person.

The **ANA Creator Marketing Conference** is an annual event that brings together the industry's leading brands, creators, agencies, and platforms to explore the next era of creator-powered marketing. The 2027 event is scheduled for March 1–3 in Las Vegas.

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APR

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- **Sean Virzi**, Content Creator

Whalar Group

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ABOUT THE ANA

The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) is the definitive voice of the marketing industry. Since 1910, we have set and advanced the agenda for marketing transformation, connecting over 1,600 member companies to an influential global network, insights, and resources that drive growth. Our members represent 20,000 brands and $400 billion in annual marketing investment. Through industry-leading research, the CMO Growth Council, and our proprietary Growth Agenda and Practices, the ANA empowers marketers to shape the future of marketing and create lasting impact for their organizations and the industry.

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Influencer Marketing

Reducing Waste and Optimizing Investment

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