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LTK

Northwestern University Retail Analytics Council &
LTK Creator Marketing Study

Creators have become
marketing infrastructure.

Here's how brands can operate them like it.



The reported data summarizes key findings from the fourth annual research study conducted by LTK in collaboration with Northwestern University in June 2026.

The study surveyed 209 C-suite marketers and senior decision-makers at brands investing in creator marketing, with the majority representing organizations generating more than \$100 million in annual revenue. Respondents included founders, CEOs, CMOs, and other senior marketing executives across industries such as food service, fashion, beauty, health and wellness, services, retail, consumer packaged goods (CPG), and entertainment.

Because the 2026 survey included updates to its sample and questionnaire, comparisons with prior years should be considered directional.



Creator marketing has become an integral part of modern marketing, influencing how consumers discover products, make purchasing decisions, and build lasting relationships with brands. As programs expand across teams and channels, so does the opportunity to drive greater business impact through a more connected, intelligent approach.



SCALE



Always-on,
across
teams

COMMERCE



Discovery
to
loyalty

TRUST



Credibility
that drives
influence

DISTRIBUTION



Content
beyond
social

INTELLIGENCE



Smarter
decisions at
every step

The next era is intelligent creator infrastructure. The competitive question is shifting to how effectively brands can connect creator relationships, content, and commerce to drive measurable business impact at scale.

From: “Are we investing in creators?”

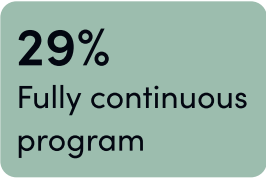
» To: “How intelligently can we operate them at scale?”

Always-on is the new baseline.

Creator marketing has outgrown the campaign model.



91% of brands operate with an always-on component



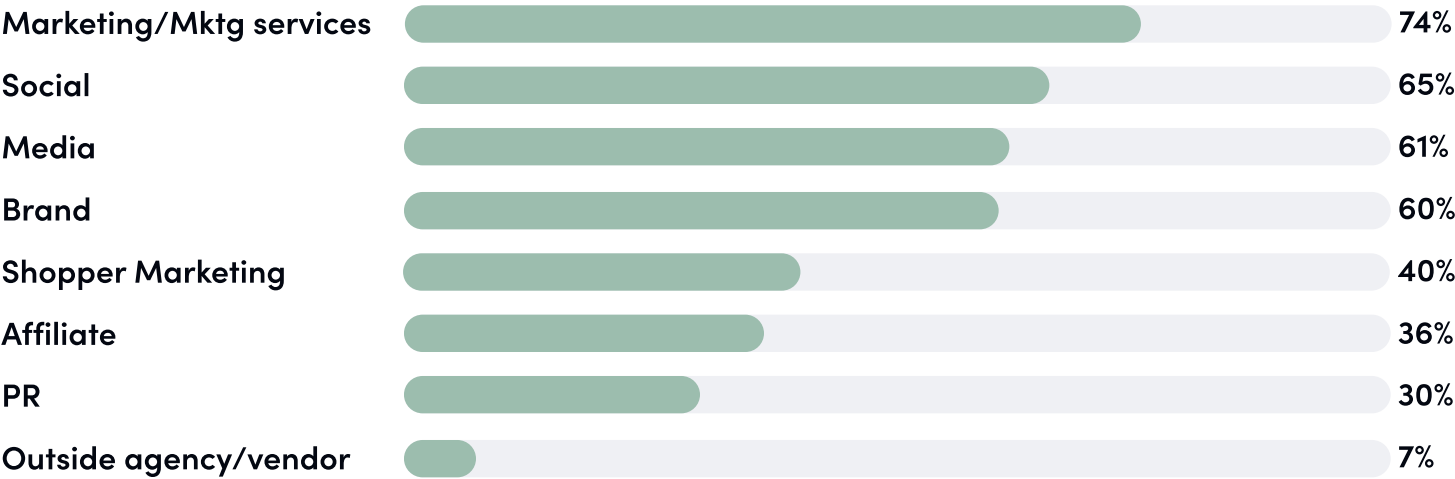
No respondent described their program as ad hoc or experimental

The average number of creators that brands work with has increased: 52% now work with 100+ creators, up from 44% in 2025.

More creators, more teams, and more specialized expertise require an operating capability that can keep up.



Teams that creator programs span



Affiliate and PR are also expanding involvement

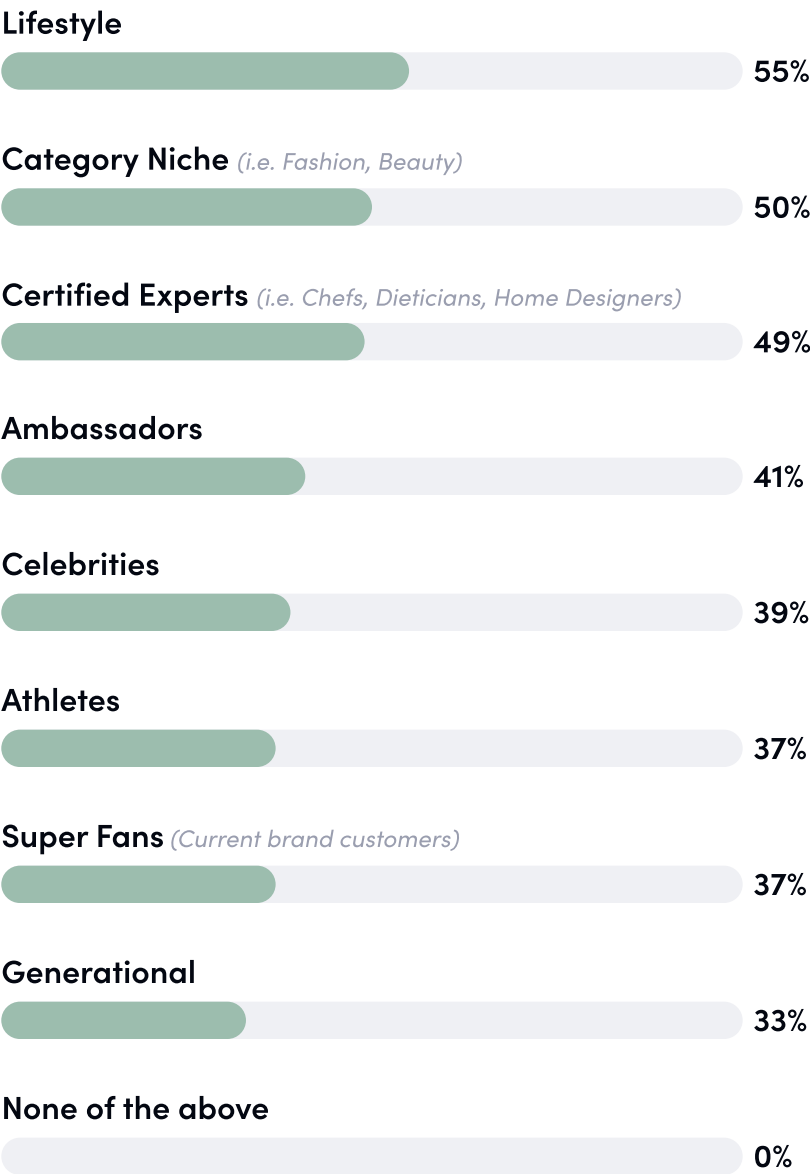
Affiliate
+7 pts YOY

PR
+15 pts YOY

SCALE | ALWAYS-ON IS THE NEW BASELINE

Most important creator categories

Lifestyle creators still lead in importance. Category-niche specialists and certified experts are close behind, showing that creator selection is becoming more specific and more useful to the consumer.



Brand action: Fund creators like an operation, with standing budget lines for relationship management and ongoing reporting. Prioritize credibility over reach, as category experts are nearly level with lifestyle creators.

COMMERCE

Creators are the commerce engine.

Creators are influencing every stage of the customer journey, helping consumers discover products, make purchasing decisions, and increasingly shape what happens *after* the sale.

Creator influence now extends far beyond awareness, spanning the entire customer journey with **conversion and loyalty leading at 55% each**.

Trusted recommendations are helping consumers make confident purchase decisions and build lasting relationships with brands.

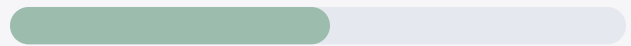


Where respondents say trusted creator recommendations most influence the business

Discovery
50%



Consideration
52%



Conversion
55%



Loyalty
55%



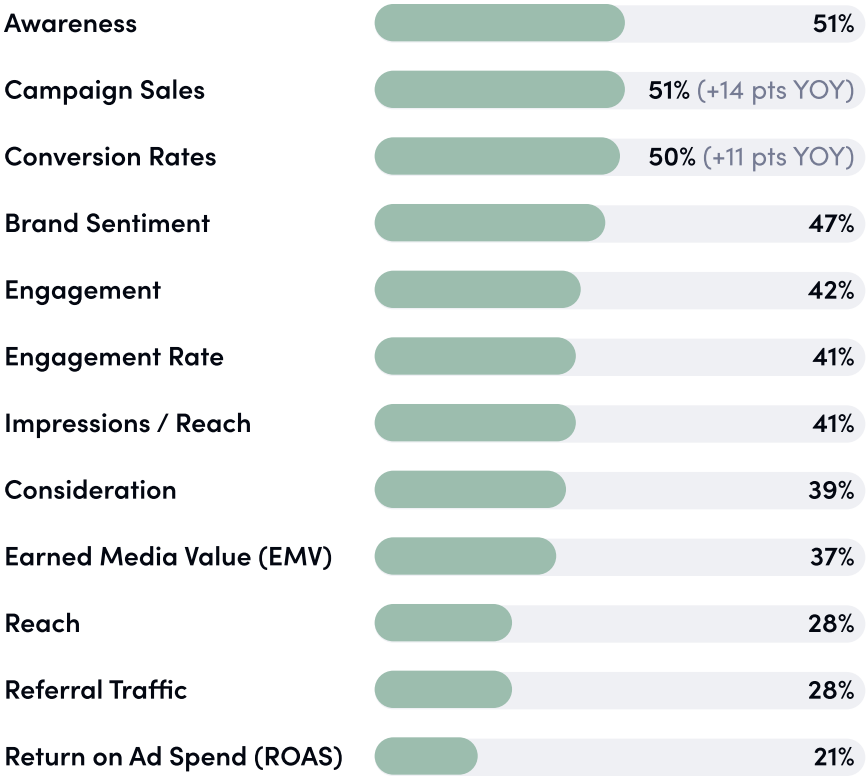
Repeat purchase
48%



COMMERCE | CREATORS ARE THE COMMERCE ENGINE



The most important metrics reported on creator campaigns



Measurement priorities are evolving alongside creator influence. Brands are increasingly looking beyond whether content was seen to the *actions it helped drive*.

Positive business impacts brands report from working with creators

Customer lifetime value :

36% >>> 41%

Brand sentiment or perception:

55% >>> 60%

Lead generation:

29% >>> 48%

Sales:

46% >>> 49%

YOY from 2025 to 2026



Brand action: Measure where the value is. Instrument conversion and loyalty, not just reach, and hold one attribution method for four quarters to build a comparable series.

TRUST

Human trust is what makes the entire system work.

As creator marketing evolves, its value remains rooted in the human connection between creators and the people who trust their recommendations.

Marketers rank creators as the #1 most trusted for consumer information



↗ ↖ The gap between creators and ads or celebrities is widening YoY (+6 points).



What marketers say trusted creator recommendations do

Helping customers feel confident in their decisions



Demonstrating real-world usage over time



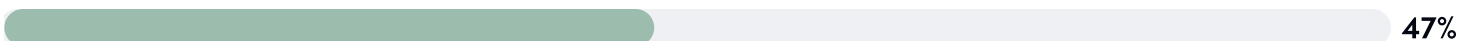
Simplifying complex choices for customers



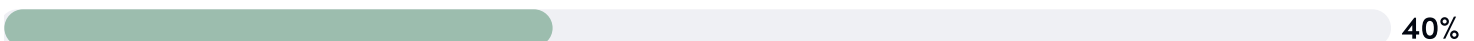
Providing sustained presence beyond a single campaign



Comparing alternatives honestly

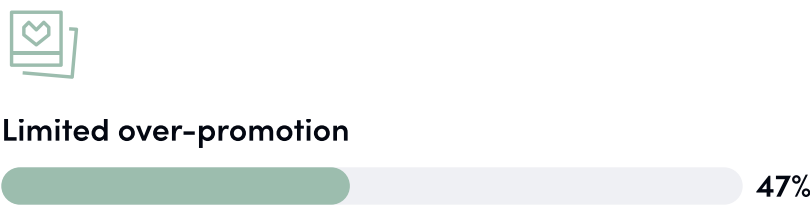
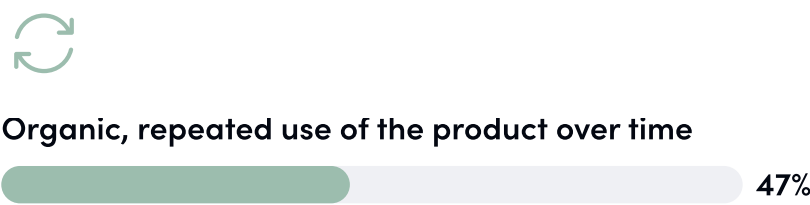
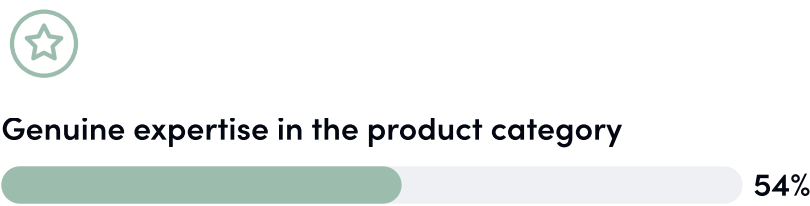
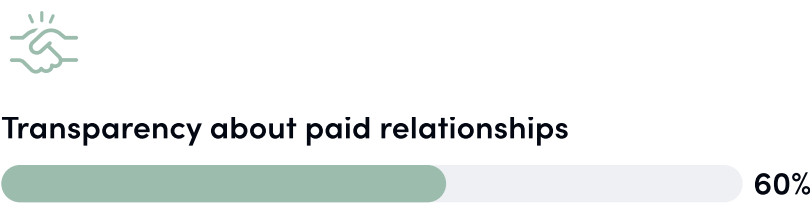
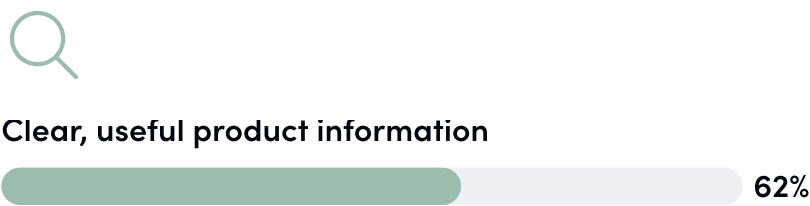


Educating while entertaining



TRUST | HUMAN TRUST MAKES THE SYSTEM VALUABLE

Why marketers say creator recommendations feel trusted to a consumer





Brand action: Write trust into the contract. Clear product information, disclosure, category expertise and honest comparison can all be specified and scored.

DISTRIBUTION

The creator post is just the start.

Creator content is becoming a core asset across the marketing ecosystem, extending beyond social into paid media, owned channels, and more.

Channels where brands use creator content beyond social



While 92% of brands use creator content in social advertising, brands are also expanding their use of creators across other marketing channels, extending the value beyond a single use.

The growing importance of content creation



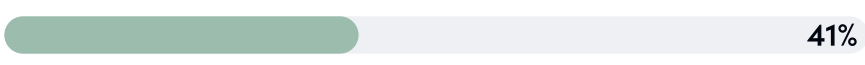
57% of brands say generating content is a goal of creator campaigns, up from 42% last year.

As content creation becomes a greater priority, so does the opportunity to maximize the value of every creator partnership.

Creator content is entering a new era of discovery.

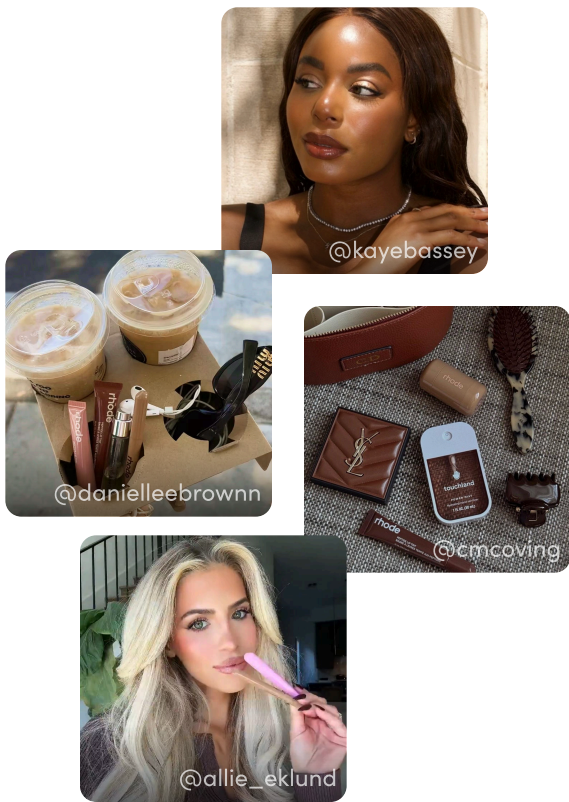
As AI-driven search reshapes how consumers discover and evaluate products, marketers are exploring new ways to extend creator content beyond traditional channels.

Brands using creator content for AI-driven search visibility



2 in 5 brands use creator content to influence what generative search surfaces about their products.

Creator content is becoming valuable in marketers' broader search and visibility strategies.



Brand action: License content to work beyond social. Use it across channels such as display, email, retail media, connected TV and AI search.

The next advantage is intelligent infrastructure.

AI is becoming essential to simplifying creator marketing workflows, improving decisions, and driving stronger business outcomes.

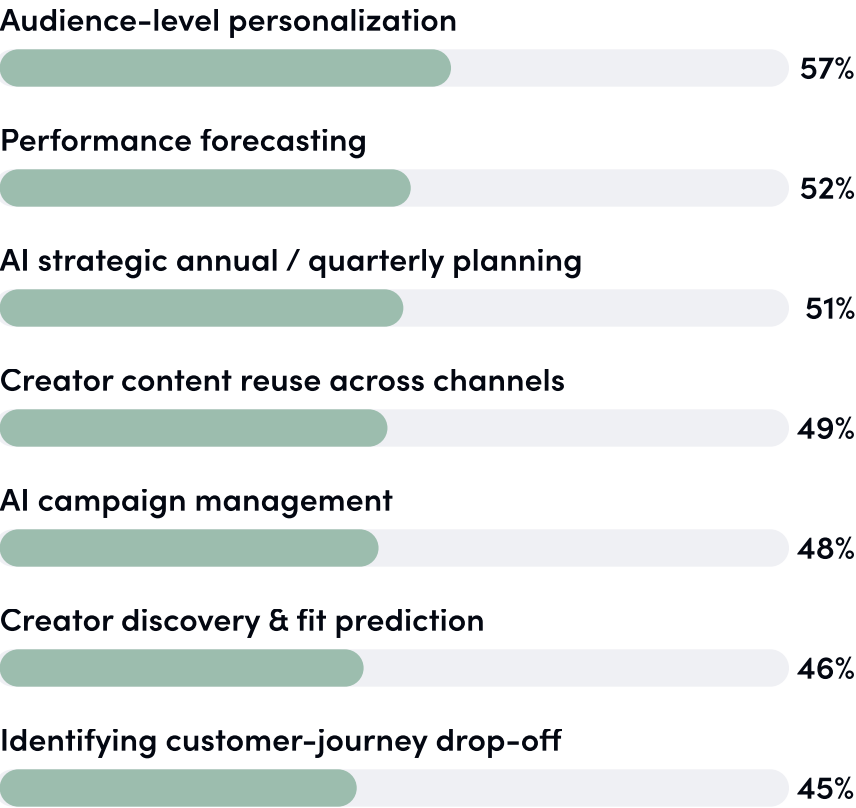
Importance of AI capability when evaluating creator marketing platforms

95% of marketers say AI capability is either a must-have or important when evaluating creator marketing platforms.



AI is present across nearly every workflow area measured. The new consideration is *what it improves*.

Creator marketing decisions makers say AI should meaningfully improve performance



The gap between technology complexity and current workflows

» **90%** of brands want a less complex creator marketing technology stack.

» **45%** still rely on manual processes, including spreadsheets, email, and direct messaging.



Brand action: Ask what the AI improves, not whether it exists. Evaluate the data powering the AI, the decisions it improves, and the manual work it eliminates.

CONCLUSION

The brands that win will connect it all.

Creator marketing is no longer a channel to add. It is infrastructure to operate.

Creator marketing has become essential to how brands build trust, influence commerce, and connect with consumers. The next opportunity is to bring it all together through always-on programs, connected teams, content that works across channels, and intelligence that drives better decisions.

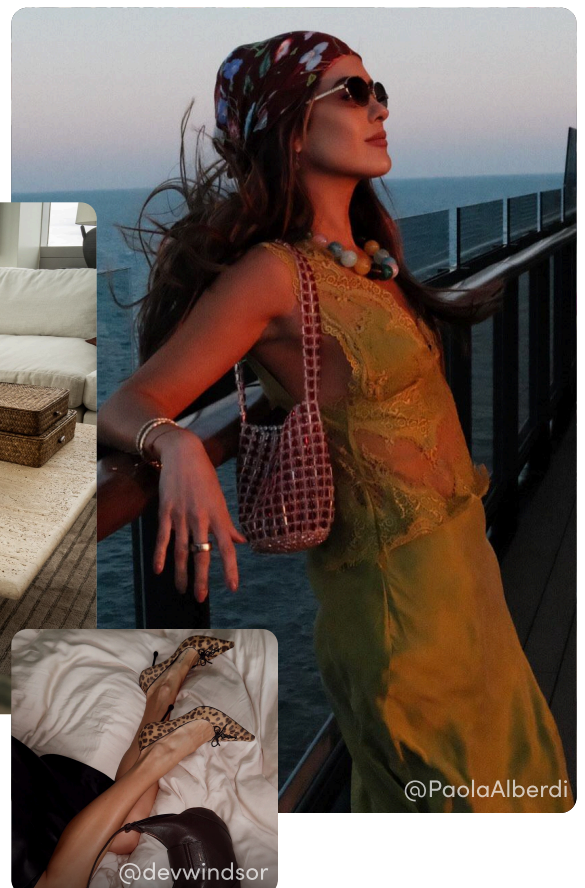
5 actions for the next era of creator marketing

- 1 Fund creators like an operation, and choose for credibility.
- 2 Measure where the value is.
- 3 Write trust into every creator contract.
- 4 License content to work beyond social.
- 5 Ask what the AI improves, not whether it exists.



The next era is intelligent creator infrastructure.

The competitive advantage is in how brands connect creator relationships, content, commerce, and intelligence to drive results at scale.



LTK CAPABILITIES

The intelligence layer powering creator marketing.

The LTK Brand Platform provides the infrastructure brands need to scale now.

What brands need next: a connected way to discover creators, activate relationships, manage content, understand commerce, and make better decisions at scale.

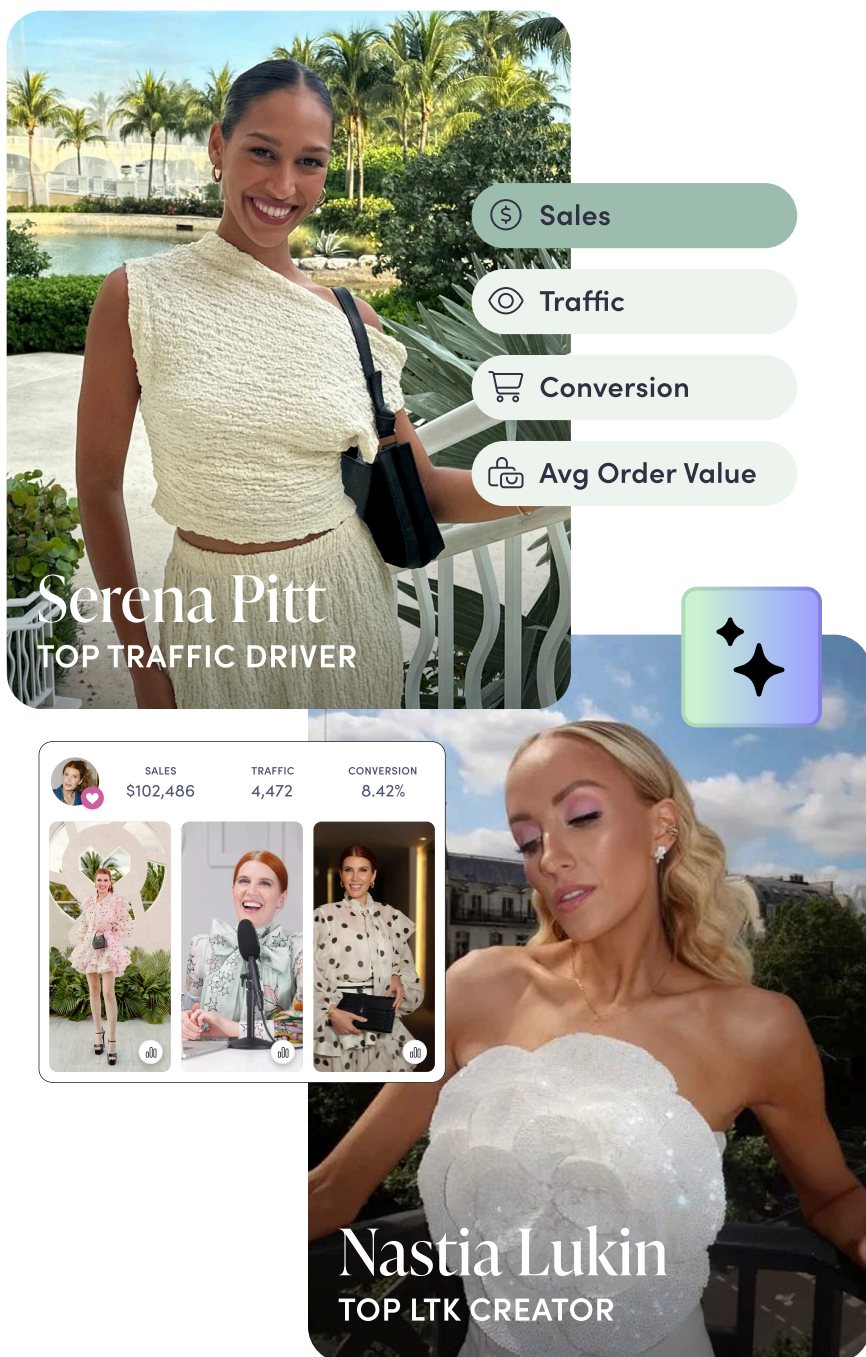
The LTK advantage: intelligence built from commerce

AI is only as useful as the data behind it.

The AI-native LTK Brand Platform is powered by a proprietary Commerce Intelligence Graph, built from more than 100 billion commerce signals across 15 years of creator, consumer, and brand behavior.

That intelligence helps brands move from finding creators to understanding which relationships, content, and actions are most likely to deliver business impact.

[Book a demo →](#)



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