

From Santa to Elsa: Influencer marketing is a tale as old as time

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Influencer marketing has often been perceived as a new industry, but in reality it has existed for much longer than many of us can imagine.



Source: www.unsplash.com

It is often associated with modern media such as print, radio, TV, and social media. However, the industry has existed since the origin of trade and has long-been integral to marketing.

Word of mouth

With the origins of agriculture being held in Africa, together with early trade, it is needless to say that influencer marketing has been an important part of early African history. Word of mouth being the most successful influencer marketing tool, the ancient African trade economy experienced many notable expansions in its richest days.

Ancient royalty, such as North Africa's Nefertiti and West Africa's Amina, exercised heavy social sway and were used to legitimise the adoption of new religions, agricultural practices, lifestyle practices, and political movements.

Church and royal family

The first influencers of Western history can be traced back to important historical figures such as The Pope of the Catholic Church and the Queen of England. In the days before the printing press and mass media, it was up to the church and the monarchy to influence the public's trust.



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In the 1700s Josiah Wedgwood, a young pottery maker, was able to leverage approval from the Queen of England and turn it into one of the biggest influencer marketing campaigns of early history. From then on, he was known as "Her Majesty's Potter", and his brand "Queensware" became the world's first luxury brand.

Fictional influencers

Influencer marketing also holds its heritage in fiction. In the 19th century, model Nancy Green became the face of the maple syrup brand, "Aunt Jemima's", the popular maple syrup brand that had its beginnings in producing pancake mix. While today, the face of Aunt Jemima's has been altered to reflect society's attitudes against racism and the promotion of a minstrel character, the face of influencer Nancy Green is still remembered and beloved by many. She will forever be considered an award-winning pioneer in the influencer marketing industry.

Perhaps the most well-known fictional character and influencer are Santa Claus. Originally presented in the colour green, a groundbreaking campaign with Coca-Cola in 1931 has since associated the jolly Christmas symbol with the colour red, and the soft drink producer with joy and festivity.

Those who were young in the 1950s will remember the Marlboro Man. A fictional rugged cowboy is responsible for molding the brand perception of Marlboro cigarettes as a stylish and masculine product, an image that has remained ever since.

Influencer marketing as we recognise it now, marked by celebrities and popular personalities, began to take shape in the 20th century. The iconic Coco Chanel became the world's first large-scale fashion influencer around the time of the first World War.

Move to authenticity

Later on into the 20th century, influencer marketing trends began to center around high-profile celebrities, athletes, actors, musicians, and supermodels. Following the rise of the ‘famous-for-being-famous’ influencer, social media allowed for the democratization of influence. Audiences today look to influencers with similar experiences and lives, having lost the ability to relate to the ultra-rich and famous.

The rise of social media came hand in hand with a more authentic marketing model that was lacking from influencer marketing models of the past. The authenticity that the public grew to crave. This has bolstered influencer marketing into what it is today, especially influencer marketing via social media. Following years of brand-regulated media and publishing, audiences today trust the reviews and insights of the people who look and live like them or provide them with a grounded, insider’s look into the lives to which they aspire.



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The expanding diversity of the industry has created room for everyone; from celebrities and macro-influencers to micro and nano influencers. Expect to see greater investment and growth for creators in the low spheres as audiences become increasingly savvy and weary of overly sponsored content, in an economy that seeks to sell the public anything and everything.

Communicating authenticity is one of the biggest global influencer marketing challenges. It is a feat African influencer marketing could use to its advantage in its journey to overtake the efficacy and stature held by the western influencer marketing space. Content creators like South Africa’s lifestyle and beauty influencer Kay Yarms, Kenya’s influencer comedienne Elsa Majimbo and Ghana’s superstar media personality and influencer Nana Aba Amoah, have unlocked the key to the future of success in influencer marketing through their sincere and highly relatable social media personas.

They represent the future of influencer marketing because they successfully communicate an authentic brand image.

Even with the incorporation of analytics, algorithms, and artificial intelligence, influencer marketing can still be volatile. As the present has come to be known, the next world-altering event can be right around the corner. These events rapidly change the wants and needs of the public and therefore ignite rapid change in the influencer marketing industry.

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