



COMMENT

Gen Z powers the rise of the corporate influencer

Firms looking to boost their reach have started hiring in-house social media personalities to put an 'authentic' touch to their company brand

Meagan Loyst | Monday September 02 2024, 12.01am BST, The Times

When you hear the term “LinkedIn influencer”, you might groan, picturing the tech bro archetype who talks about sales and how they respect people and engages in a bit too much self-promotion.

But what if I told you that blue-chip brands were reaching hundreds of millions of people by employing LinkedIn influencers in-house to promote new products, company culture and more?

That’s exactly what is happening at Deloitte’s operations in Germany, Australia and Switzerland, with the hire of Lara Sophie Bothur as their first full-time corporate influencer. Her LinkedIn posts about “tech for good” and other topics have 400 million impressions (the number of times her content has been seen by other users), with individual posts reaching 840,000 people on average. She educates her audience about Deloitte in a way that feels authentic, offering advice to young professionals, thoughts on emerging technology and trends and advocating for women in technology. Inside nearly all of her posts are nods to the things she’s learning at Deloitte, ranging from a visit to a robotics factory to how she’s learning to use AI responsibly.

“Corporate influencing” as a trend has emerged organically as more Gen Z-ers in the workforce aim to build personal brands alongside

their “nine-to-five” identity. It is a huge asset to companies both in terms of retaining talented employees and expanding the reach of their brands.

A recent study from the start-up Refine Labs found that sharing information through a personal LinkedIn profile led to nearly three times as many impressions and five times as much engagement as doing so through a company’s LinkedIn profile. This checks out when you compare Deloitte and Bothur’s posts. Deloitte has 16 million followers on LinkedIn and had about 30 likes per post for its last ten posts, whereas Bothur has 300,000 followers yet had about 2,700 likes per post.

This is partially why we’re seeing more founders building personal brands on LinkedIn to promote their companies. Hebbia is a fast-emerging AI company in Silicon Valley, having recently raised \$130 million in a funding round led by Andreessen Horowitz, the respected venture capital firm. Hebbia’s post about the funding attracted only 400 likes, whereas a post by George Sivulka, its founder, got about 2,400. When selecting where to place your praise, it’s generally more attractive to go for individuals rather than corporations.

In corporate influencing, the role of ambassador, and even employee, is taking many forms.

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Vogue, for example, has hired Jack Schlossberg, the grandson of John F Kennedy, the former US president, as political correspondent to create social media content in the months leading up to the US presidential election. Schlossberg’s is a face that Gen Z already knows. He has more than 400,000 followers on TikTok. He’s also smart and his commentary will be well worth reading.

Young, ambitious companies have been making good use of influencers for a while now. Take SET Active, the activewear start-up. It hired Sam Vicchiollo, a Gen Z TikTok star who has 2.2 million followers, to create content on the brand’s TikTok account. This increased the company’s average views by between five and seven times.

Waterboy, the hydration start-up, followed a similar approach when it hired Jenna Palek, a TikToker who has 638,000 followers, to create content for it. The results? Waterboy content that previously was seen by 27,000 people leapt to 320,000 people after Palek worked her magic.

Start-ups that used in-house influencers know that people on TikTok

are already invested in following the behind-the-scenes lives of their favourite content creators. Hiring them to talk about a brand adds something new to their story. We're seeing them at work, bringing their humour and creativity to life in a new way.

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I had never seen a company create a brand trip specifically geared towards customers before Palek launched Waterboy's "Cabo with Customers" initiative, creating six social media challenges that would help the company to select customers to come on an all-expenses paid trip to Mexico with a plus one. It is a creative and fresh initiative that gives something back to customers and helps the brand to stand out as innovative and in touch with what Gen Z wants.

If you don't think these influencers are "real" employees, think again. They can be just as demanding. Palek laid it out to me. "While I do think more brands will look towards hiring influencers to run their socials, keeping them invested in the company's success will likely require long-term benefits such as equity," she said. "The reality is that most influencers can make a yearly corporate income in just a few partnerships on their own, so long-term benefits and personal relationships will be key to keeping influencers."

Young companies already work hard to attract and retain the best people. Fighting for software engineers is one thing, but influencers as well? I'm afraid so, especially if you are looking to reach a Gen Z audience.

Meagan Loyst is the founder of Gen Z VCs, a community of Gen Z founders and investors with 27,000 members from 80 countries.

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