

Under the influence

Sports nutrition and weight management brands face complex challenges in influencer marketing

By Ilene Lelchuk

In the age of total information access, where social media reigns, it would be nice to think the cream rises to the top—and that such cream is made of organic, transparently-sourced ingredients from grass-fed cows who submitted to peer-reviewed research.

Yet anyone who’s googled the words “diet” and “fitness” knows that social media platforms can be an echo chamber of quick-fix carnival barkers, doctored “before” and “after” photos, and self-proclaimed “experts” who are more certifiable than certified.

So how do nutrition and supplement brands—increasingly reliant on influencers to promote their products to consumers glued to their mobile devices—avoid costly pitfalls and Insta-fakers?

“There is no question that influencers are growing in importance in the marketing scheme overall, but I do think you have a lot of pseudo influencers to watch out for,” says Jeff Hilton, co-founder of **BrandHive** marketing agency for wellness products.

Dr. Susan Kleiner, a nutrition expert who, through her High Performance Nutrition, is a highly sought-after consultant to pro athletes and teams, agrees.

“There are a ton of athlete influencers who don’t use the product they promote. It’s so frustrating because I see all this nonsense out there,” says Kleiner, who is an influencer in her own right for **Vitargo** muscle recovery drink and **USANA** supplements.

The consequences for brands aligned with the wrong ambassador? Lost trust,

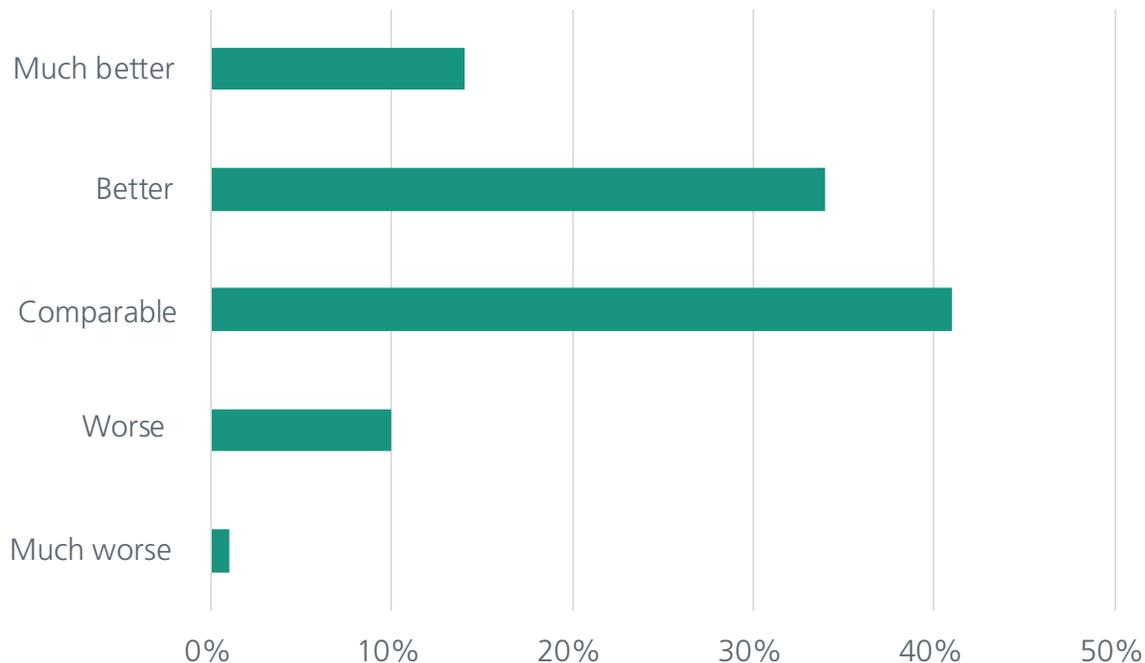
NBJ Takeaways

- » Influencer marketing is both especially essential and especially challenging for sports nutrition and weight management brands
- » Vetting influencers is complicated, and support from influencer marketing agencies can be helpful
- » Influencer marketing is getting more attention from activists and federal regulators

lost customers, lost sales.

Still, with consumers now spending up to three hours on social media per day, influencer marketing on Instagram, YouTube,

COMPARED TO OTHER CHANNELS, ROI FROM INFLUENCER MARKETING IS...



Source: Mediakix 2019 Influencer Marketing Survey

Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and other platforms is a “must have” if brands want to reach audiences, according to Hilton.

To do it right, companies need to stay on their toes.

The lay of the land

Brands can start by understanding the landscape.

Influencer marketing has grown into a \$6.5 billion industry, according to a 2019 Influencer Marketing Hub report. It’s on track to be worth up to \$15 billion by 2022, according to *Business Insider Intelligence*.

More than 70% of Gen Zers and millennials follow influencers, according to the global survey research company Morning Consult.

50% of Gen Zers and millennials say social media is where they most often learn about new products to buy, Morning Consult reported.

Instagram is the top influencer platform, followed closely by YouTube. Nearly 70% of digital marketers plan to invest in Instagram for their influencer campaigns,

according to a 2019 survey by Mediakix.

More than 500,000 influencers are active on Instagram alone, according to a 2019 report by InfluencerDB.

With so many fish in the sea, how do brands catch the right one?

Many brands opt out of the endless Google rabbit hole hunt and hire agencies to do the vetting. Agencies like Traacker and Viral Nation use proprietary technology and databases to track influencers by specialty, engagement levels, demographics, and price.

Another resource for finding authentic influencers is the recently released list of Top 100 Responsible Health and Wellness Influencers of 2020 compiled by researchers at **New Hope Network**, publisher of the *Nutrition Business Journal*.

Fit and legit

The only constant in this industry, or any other industry, during the last decade has been change, and nowhere is that truer than in the world of influencer marketing.

“It’s been a wild ride,” says Gabe Feld-

man, development lead for Viral Nation, a global influencer marketing agency. He’s worked with influencers and brands for nearly 10 years.

The biggest change he’s seen? Today’s sports, weight-management, and nutrition supplement brands invest more heavily in wellness and lifestyle-oriented influencers rather than ab-obsessed bodybuilders and tiny-waisted dieters. “They are looking for regular people like you and I, not these booty models and guys jacked up on pre-workout,” Feldman says.

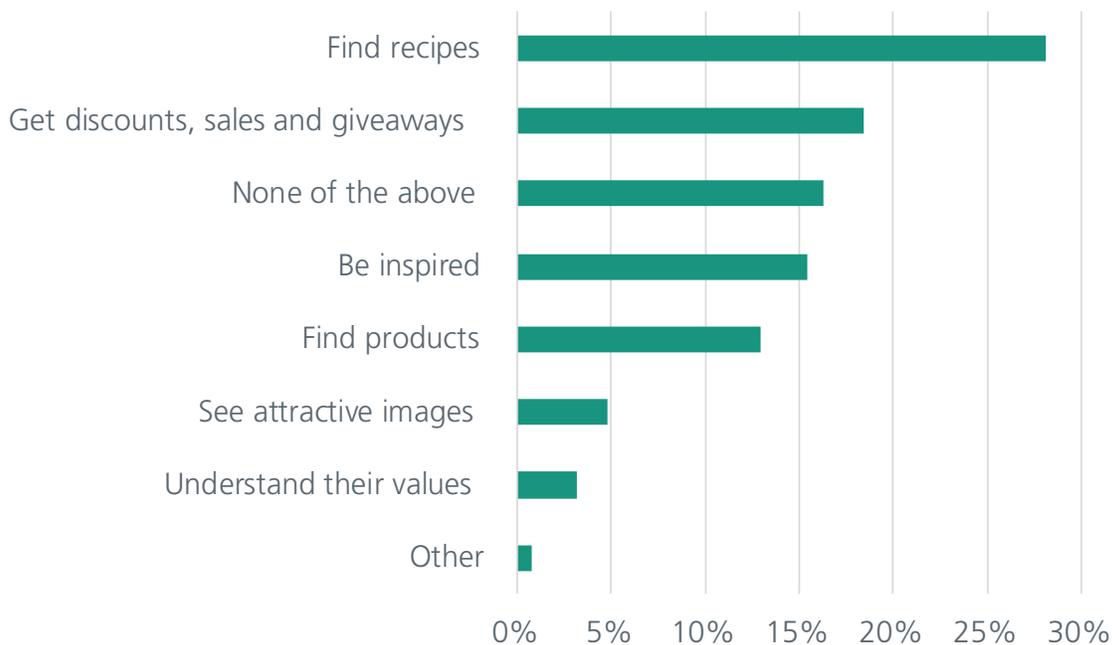
According to a 2018 Econsultancy survey, 55% of U.S. and UK marketers believe nano, micro, and mid-level influencers make stronger and more authentic connections with consumers than celebrities can.

The tiers of influencers are roughly defined as: nano (500-5,000 followers), micro (5,000-30,000 followers), mid-level/macro (30,000-500,000 followers), and celebrity/VIP (500,000+ followers).

Each tier serves a different purpose.

“The larger the influencer, the more awareness they drive,” says Evy Lyons, vice

I FOLLOW INFLUENCERS OR BRANDS BECAUSE I WANT TO:



Source: NEXT Data and Insights

president of marketing for Traackr, an influencer marketing platform. “The smaller the influencer, the more purchase influence they can create for your brand because of their closer connection and engagement with their audience.”

Cost and effect

Lyon’s advises brands to evaluate four key factors when selecting an influencer.

- Connect with an influencer who your audience looks up to. If your target consumer is the weekend warrior, don’t partner with an insanely bulked-up body builder.
- Pick an influencer whose content attracts great engagement—likes, shares, comments, and clicks. Also assess wheth-

of \$975,000 per post. One of his many paid partnerships includes **Herbalife 24 CR7 Drive**.

A tier below, Australian weightlifter and CrossFit Games athlete Tia Clair Toomey, with 1.2 million Instagram followers, has a suggested fee of \$3,320 per post, according to Traackr. Toomey’s partnerships include **TrueProtein** supplements, apple cider vinegar **Goli Gummies**, and **beam** blends with CBD.

How do brands know if their money is well spent?

Hilton points to this successful example: Jim Stoppani, a pumped up and heavily tattooed sports nutrition influencer with 325,000 Instagram followers, last

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– Susan Kleiner, Vitargo

er engagement drops when the influencer discloses a sponsorship on a post (using hashtags such as #ad, #partnership, #brandambassador).

- Verify that the influencer’s audience is real and not purchased or boosted by bots.
- Protect your brand. Scan for red flags like extreme politics, prejudices, doctored photos, and false claims.

Choosing the right influencer is as expensive as it is essential. And the costs are rising. Some major CPG brands spend \$10 million-\$20 million a year on influencer marketing.

“It used to be you’d pay about \$1,000 to an influencer for one post and a couple of subposts. But that is hard to come by these days,” Hilton says. “For good influencers, you’re going to end up paying \$2,000-\$4,000 for a package of posts and photos.”

Instagram’s biggest earner in 2019 was soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo with 188 million followers and reported earnings

year posted a video promoting the muscle building benefits of beta-alanine, an amino acid in the branded ingredient **CarnoSyn**, a client of BrandHive.

The video post reached about 24,000 people, garnered 900 reactions, comments, and shares, and resulted in 500 post clicks to the website.

Breaking up

Unfortunately, when an influencer campaign goes bad, it can go very, *very* bad.

In 2015, Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson claimed that drinking Reliant Recovery Water protected him from a concussion. Wilson was an investor in Recovery Water, a now defunct brand.

PewDiePie, a YouTube superstar with more than 65 million subscribers and a paid partnership with **G Fuel**, has been accused of making anti-Semitic and racist comments.

Three popular British Instagrammers, all reality TV stars, were secretly filmed in

2019 auditioning to promote a diet drink that they hadn’t tried and were told included cyanide. (“Cyanora” was a fictional drink and part of a BBC investigation.)

The Kardashian sisters regularly come under fire for posting selfies with detox teas like Flat Tummy Co—without mentioning they also have personal trainers, chefs, and doctors to help them achieve their thin-fluencer bods.

“I’m not quite sure why you should trust someone who isn’t an expert,” says Kleiner of High Performance Nutrition consultancy. “There have always been snake oil salesmen.”

Know the rules

Brands should be aware of the growing legislative response and community backlash. Pervasive promotions of miracle diet and detox products have led to calls for legislation, Federal Trade Commission investigations, and a high-profile Change.org petition authored by actress Jameela Jamil demanding Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat stop celebrities from posting those advertisements.

In late 2019, Instagram announced it will restrict people under the age of 18 from seeing posts that promote weight loss products or types of cosmetic surgery.

Also last year, the FTC updated its guidelines requiring social media influencers to “disclose any time they are endorsing a product because of a paid partnership or personal affiliation with the brand.”

Supplement brands should also be aware that claims made by paid influencers must follow the claims limitations of DSHEA regulations.

Coming soon

Expect more regulations in 2020 and beyond, predicts Feldman of Viral Nation.

Feldman also forecast that brands will spend more of their influencer marketing budgets on longform content, primarily on YouTube where there is more room for storytelling.

On the flip side, brands also will be trying to tap into TikTok’s soaring popularity, a tricky task considering the platform’s 15-second format and somewhat mysterious algorithm that allows anybody to go viral.

“This is definitely going to be the year of TikTok,” Lyons predicted. 🌱