What We Lose When Influencers Only Post Paid Content

No one appreciates an influencer more than I do. I've been a believer in real people sharing their points of view and building platforms long before Instagram existed—I touted the power of message forums, bloggers and YouTube haul videos (remember those?) back in the early days of social media.

In 2010, I co-founded the first talent management agency to represent social media personalities—and it was a long slog to convince brands of their power.

By 2017, my influencer clients earned massive incomes, starred in television commercials, manufactured their own products, wrote bestsellers and collaborated with global brand behemoths. I have been at the helm of thousands—literally thousands—of influencer campaigns, and I helped create the monstrous price tags attached to influencer posts that brands face today. Guilty as charged.

My hot take? Not every influencer and brand interaction should come with a price tag. I've stood by this belief from the beginning; there was and still is a world where things need to be fully organic, without a dollar sign or contract attached.

For the first time in over a decade, I'm on the brand side. Like other brand leaders and marketers, I find myself scrolling through the social media labyrinth of #ad and #partner on the daily; the quest for authenticity isn't easy. Influencers, like artists, deserve fair compensation for their craft—their ability to sway public opinion and shape trends is real, something I wholeheartedly believe in.

But as the co-owner of a brand in a bit of a startup phase, I don't have unlimited dollars, and am discerning with how

they’re spent.

My first filter of the search: What’s the ratio of sponsored vs. unsponsored posts? When influencers are paid for every visit, post and shout-out, the magic of genuine recommendation gets lost.

This isn’t a petition to abandon paid partnerships—far from it. This is a conversation, a plea even, about much-needed middle ground where not every moment is a transaction, especially if it’s an invitation without a list of deliverables. It happens a lot in fashion: Gifted shoes, bags or clothes lead to posts when brands may not have budgets but the talent loves the item. Same in sports (free tickets), automobiles (driving experiences) and so on.

Our brand, like many, also has inherent value to offer influencers—you can’t put a price tag on strong reach, behind-the-scenes tours and meetup space.

This exploration is about finding the sweet spot where influencers can be both brand ambassadors and genuine advocates. We see it as true symbiosis.

When I directly represented talent, I always suggested that they RSVP “yes” to things that got them excited, even without a paycheck. I championed them when they believed in something enough to promote it (which, by the way, Naomi Campbell is doing right now for emerging fashion designers). I wish more influencer managers and agents had this mentality today.

At Sloomoo Institute, we approach influencer partnerships with a dual lens: We understand the need for fair compensation, especially if someone is making content on a level that goes beyond the snap of an iPhone, but we also crave the

authenticity that comes from genuine enjoyment and voluntary engagement, which can happen on any given day. It’s a dance of sorts, one where the rhythm of what’s genuine shouldn’t be lost to a contract.

Trends are pendulums. Today, there’s a hunger for more relatable perspectives. The space will evolve again and again, along with the zeitgeist of cultural movements. New platforms will emerge (remember when TikTok was Musical.ly?) and fresh faces will become the coveted ones of tomorrow. In this ever-changing milieu, my hope is that we—brands, influencers, agencies—embrace the core value that started it all: authenticity. Doing some things just because they’re fun.

In the end, it’s not just about brands or influencers; it’s about the people who follow both, who trust both, who believe in the stories they tell and the reasons they share them. As my brand grows, I will always want to have an organic relationship that doesn’t come with a wire transfer.

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