



Understanding 'Influencers' and managing 'Relations'

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Influencer Relations provides a tangible link between marketing and revenue, opening up new channels to customers and a network of powerful advocates. This is a very necessary function given IT decision-makers can now take information and form perceptions about companies from a variety of mediums. Influencer relations, however, is often considered a black art and something that only the biggest IT PR and marketing departments can afford.

We beg to differ. As long as you keep the purpose of conducting influencer relations in mind at all times, and kept the relationships simple and focused, even small IT firms can reap the benefits.

Background

It always staggers me how PR and marketing people use terms and propose tactics that they don't really seem to understand.

It's no wonder, therefore, that individuals purchasing PR services in particular are often sceptical about what they are buying. It's also easy to see why in-house marketing purchasers get carried away with the new must-have communications 'tool' often at the expense of selecting the right message to accompany it.

I witnessed this during my years at Microsoft. The term 'influencer relations' became the new 'black', the term 'du jour'. Everyone wanted to include an influencer element in their campaigns without really knowing what it was, how they were going to execute it and if it was even needed. And the PR and marketing agencies, I'm sure, started to feel that if there was not an influencer element, to the campaigns they were proposing, they were unlikely to get sign off for it.

Context

After a three-year stint managing various Microsoft thought-leadership and product PR campaigns, I became Microsoft UK's first Influencer Relations Manager reporting to marketing. It was a fantastic opportunity to really get to grips with understanding influencers and managing relations.

I hope the following insights and suggested steps will be useful to you in understanding the roles that influencers can play and how to procure appropriate external services to support this without getting blinded by the smoke and mirrors.

Different Types

An influencer can be classed as any kind of organisation or person, whose behavior can have an effect on the opinions of customers. For the purpose of the B2B technology industry, we will focus on five types:

- **Associations (membership bodies, think tanks, not-for-profits, NGOs)**
- **Academics (professional institutes, business schools)**
- **Independents (consultants, bloggers, pundits)**
- **Media (online community sites, newsletters, magazines, newspapers)**
- **Analysts (traditional analyst houses and new/emerging virtual organisations)**

Roles and Responsibilities

PR people talk about the role of the influencer in establishing thought-leadership and the importance of nurturing a network of advocates in order to build affinity for a company. I agree with this but building advocacy and affinity is not an easy task undertaken purely by PR. Why? Because the influencers see through it as just that - PR!

PR can play a co-ordination role in supporting influencer relations; researching and identifying key players, sending them relevant materials/content and monitoring their public face, but influencers want access not gatekeepers and should not be treated in the same way as journalists.

To truly understand their motivations and manage effective relationships requires face-time from senior executives and resembles more of a business development relationship.

What I am trying to say here is outsource this with care. First impressions count especially if there is not a globally recognised brand to fall back on.

What's in it for them?

The benefits to technology companies are clear. You can apply the influencer's credibility to enhance the attractiveness of your activities; you can access the influencer's audience for networking or community building; you benefit from their knowledge to understand important industry issues and gather insider market information (industries, customers, competitors). But what is in it for them?

Some are driven and measured by sponsorship money alone but most have a more deeply routed desire for partnering and guard their independence fiercely. Academics, for example, may be looking into new technology areas or business models for educational purposes. Associations may want to improve the environment for their members through new services or they may be responsible for driving best practice. Independents or online communities may just want to ensure that they are at the cutting edge of new developments and innovations and get the inside track.

“ Whatever their motivation, it's essential that you capture it early and keep it front of mind.”

5 Steps to better influencer relations:

1) Research and qualify

What audience are you trying to reach and therefore which influencers play a role? This is something that PR can certainly help with. Many of the non-traditional influencers, outside of the press and analyst community, can be uncovered online or in the media by inquisitive PRs. Blogs are connected to blogs; key luminaries speak at webinars and take part in online communities.

If you want to get a more scientific view, there are organisations out there that will do a full audit but this comes at a very high premium that not even the largest vendors can always justify.

Next step is to identify how many customers, members, readers, alumni, peers does each influencer have and what are their key areas of focus. How credibly are they received by their audience and how often do they publish or engage with them directly? They may be very credible but engage with their audience infrequently. They may have an audience that is, in the main, inactive.

It is also important to ask yourself whether the influencer truly understands your market; they may have the audience's ear, but perhaps not on IT issues. Likewise, they may have the knowledge of IT but a very niche audience.

2) Rank

Sometimes it is the more spurious influencers, which are not as well known, that make a better relationship fit.

Plot your influencers on a bubble quadrant, a bit like one from Gartner, using size of audience to depict the size of the bubble, the size of their audience impact to plot their whereabouts on one axis and their awareness and understanding of your company on the other.

That way you can visualise which are going to require what resources, which are going to need more education and what tiering, in order of priority, you can apply.

3) Engage

It is necessary to make contact at this point; at least with the handful of most important ones, in order to gauge their input about what is it they look for from vendor relationships.

You also need to establish whether there is some common ground. Sometimes it can take a significant amount of time to get a true understanding of this but I would strongly urge that you do not move forward to the next step until you have got this nailed.

It can take months and multiple meetings before trust has developed, positive rapport is established, barriers are dropped and the common ground and perceived value from their side is identified.

This is where more than PR horsepower is required. Senior people in the organisation must be prepared to invest the time in meeting with the key influencers one-to-one.

4) Allocate resources

This could just be time or information in its simplest form. But once you have started dialogue it needs to be maintained. Often influencers want access to senior people at the outset but once common ground is established other individuals can be nominated roles and responsibilities for ongoing engagement?

It is important here to assign a relationship owner for each influencer - even if it's a sales person for one, a director's PA for another and an in-house marketing contact for another; depending on where the common ground is.

More formal resources may also be required in the form of marketing budget, for joint activities, or the development of an ongoing influencer relationship programme. See what SAP is doing for more ideas on the latter, although it's a bit skewed for analysts.

<http://www.sap.com/about/analystrelations/index.epx>

5) Test and measure

Once a deeper understanding of the possible relationship outputs exist, KPIs can be set. Managing relationships with influencers impacts the likelihood of customers making a purchase, but is very hard to measure joint activity unless you stay focussed on the end result.

One thing that influencers do well is provide a sanity check for the relevance and effectiveness of your marketing; making it more relevant to the sales process, offering new routes for getting marketing out and ensuring it is something that sales people can utilise.

They should be present in your marketing, you need to access their network with it and you need to benefit from their industry insight to make sure that the marketing hits the right buttons.

Conclusion

I am not intentionally meaning to put down PR people. At the heart of it I am one, however, I have had the luxury of working in-house at Microsoft and therefore having exposure to some of the best tech PR people on the planet. The audience that I am writing this for, may not in the most part, have the luxury of a large in-house team and my point is very much about how much of influencer relations can be outsourced to your typical agency.

I have also highlighted that the purpose of influencer relations is much more than just thought-leadership and generating positive stories, Its about building bridges between sales and marketing by getting a strong pulse from the customer directly and then responding to it.

I have also hopefully got across that this is not a black art. It doesn't have to be complex but it does require senior-level support to get it off the ground and an appreciation that marketing funds could and should be funnelled in this direction in the future.



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