

THE INCREASING ROLE OF INFLUENCERS IN CITY MARKETING – INSPIRING INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

In recent years, influencer marketing has become a hot topic in marketing within Hungary and abroad. It is not just another new tool, because one of its advantages is that it works on many platforms. People live in 'advertising noise', therefore it is important for brands to find the way to consumers. A popular and effective means of advertising is the deployment of influencers who present brand messages in a personal voice and a unique way – they are people who consumers can identify with, and the consumers' openness towards messages is also greater in such cases. What is the definition of an influencer? How should brands and cities cooperate with them? Why is Instagram an extremely important platform? How can influencers visiting a city (or living there) facilitate city marketing? The study examines the necessary theoretical background and discusses international best practices from the world of influencer marketing to provide ideas and inspiration for city marketing professionals cooperating with influencers or planning to do so.

Keywords: *influencer, city marketing, branding, consumer behaviour.*

1. THEORETICAL VIEW: WHO ARE INFLUENCERS AND WHY DO PEOPLE FOLLOW THEM?

1.1. An explanation of the word 'influencer' for decision makers

First of all, it is necessary to define the term itself. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2020), an influencer is "someone who affects or changes the way that other people behave". Another explanation is "a person who is paid by a company to show and describe its products and services on social media, encouraging other people to buy them". Listed examples in the dictionary illustrate that a person can be an influencer in a micro-community or even within an

industry, e.g. fashion and design. The term is also described as a *profession*, referring to a career path and full-time employment as an influencer.

István Sas (2018), a legendary figure of the Hungarian advertising industry said that opinion leaders are '*instrumental figures*' who can have a more powerful effect on others with their openness, vibe and character.

Another definition by The Balance Small Business (2019) says that "Opinion leaders have established *authority in a given area, market, or industry*". Some may make a career out of "influencing their audience, impacting their feeling about industry trends and current events, as well as affecting their consumer behavior."

Tamás Joaneli, head of the BeSocial agency says that an influencer is an "opinion leader in a smaller community *who his/her followers believe, therefore they influence the followers' decisions*". (Blog.iab.hu, 2018)

In his post 'Who are influencers and what is influencer marketing?', online expert Balázs Máté (2019) highlights that influencers are "*people who have gathered a sizeable follower base around themselves on the internet. Influencer "means someone who influences"*", which is no coincidence, because influencers have the power to shape their followers' opinions and purchase decisions. This is the basis of influencer marketing.

According to Influencer Marketing Hub's definition (2019), "opinion leaders have the *unique ability to win people's trust and influence their opinions*. They come up with *original ideas and actionable advice* to help entrepreneurs, businesses, and individuals achieve their personal and organisational goals."

Therefore we can say that opinion leaders are people who are *outstanding members of the community*, because they have personality traits that enable them to influence others' views and shape attitudes. They can stand out from their environment as a result of their unique style, professional knowledge, prestige or extensive network of contacts, which they can use to address and influence groups.

At the same time, Interactive Advertising Bureau's glossary on influencers (IAB Hungary 2019) points out that this is not a new phenomenon. Accordingly, "in communication theory, the opinion leader is an influential person – or one considered as such – *who interprets information for others*." The term was first used in a 1955 study by Elihu Katz and Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, who researched the opinion-shaping function of mass media, and found that people's decisions are more influenced by opinion leaders than media.

1.2. The power of influencers – their impact on consumer decisions

Once we have set up categories, it is worth examining *why people follow influencers*. One of the fundamental answers is that they do so because influencers produce *quality content that is interesting for their followers*. As an article by the Márkamonitor magazine (2018) points out, there is an *expectation* that published contents be *entertaining, creative and interactive*.

In October 2017, SAKKOM Interactive agency and Special Media Effect conducted research (Kreatív Online 2017) on the following of influencers. Their most important conclusions

regarding data from Hungary may be summarised as follows: *followers of Facebook or Youtube influencers, stars and celebrities are mostly interested in useful, interesting contents (65%) and funny, entertaining videos (48%)* – at least according to the influencers themselves. However, their responses to the question regarding *the most popular themes of the content they produce* show that *funny, entertaining content* is clearly on top with 31%.

Rakuten's Influencer Marketing Global Survey 2019 showed that 41% of consumers find at least one new brand or product from an influencer weekly, and 24% say they do so daily. 65% of shoppers discover something of this frequency, therefore brands have many opportunities to reach new consumers via influencers. Only less than one percent of respondents said they 'never' discover a new brand or product via an influencer. The report also says that *87% of surveyed consumers were inspired to make a purchase based on what they saw from an influencer.*

Last but not least, it is worth examining what group is most affected by influencers. Unsurprisingly, it is the Z generation. A survey conducted in Hungary also showed that "online opinion leaders claim that they have the greatest influence on 17-18 year-olds (72.4%), followed by 14-16 year-olds (69%) and 19-23 year-olds (62.1%). These young people like influencers because they are authentic everyday people facing the same problems as their followers. The fans look up to influencers, whose secret lies in directness, personal voice and uniqueness – however, it is also useful if the content produced by them is funny and entertaining." (TanTrend Oktatási Portál 2018).

2. PRACTICAL VIEW: COOPERATION WITH INFLUENCERS

As seen above, *one of the best tools to reach the Z generation is influencer marketing.* As the international statistics on the topic highlight (Rgstudio.hu 2018):

- "Influencer marketing offers a huge opportunity in the course of brand building or the introduction of new products, because 71% of Internet users are more likely to make purchases following recommendations seen or read in social media. Moreover, 70% of teenage YouTube users pay more attention to the opinion of the followed influencers than other content published by celebrities.
- The deployment of opinion leaders functions as an *excellent content marketing tool*, because the brand may appear on social platforms as some kind of '*friendly recommendation*'. In addition, via influencers, the brand message may get to followers and target groups who the brand would be unable to reach with traditional advertisements.
- According to TapInfluence's report, 73% of advertisers have a budget separated for influencer marketing. In addition, 86% of them took advantage of the opportunities of influencer marketing in 2017, and 92% of respondents were satisfied with the results of their cooperation. Video posts prove to be the most effective content, and 86% of enterprises use online video content in their campaigns.
- Influencer marketing is also a very *useful tool to increase ROI*. Research has shown that each 1 USD invested results in 6.5 USD investment, therefore the return of campaigns

based on influencer marketing performs much better than traditional online advertisement campaigns.”

Mátyás Dobó (Doransky), a blogger himself points out that *the essence of influencer marketing is that companies do not communicate with their consumers directly, but influencers deliver messages created for the target group.*

The value of influencer marketing comes from 3 sources altogether (Gerillamarketing.blog.hu 2018):

1. *Social reach*: Influencers can reach hundreds of thousands of consumers via their own social platforms and blogs.
2. *Original content*: Influencers produce unique content, which is usually an effective marketing content for the brand.
3. *Consumer trust*: Influencers maintain a strong connection with their audience, who have trust in the influencer’s opinion.

Typical solutions of opinion leader cooperations have appeared in recent years, although it is a characteristic of the ‘genre’ that such appearances are always atypical. The advertiser cannot create a word-for-word or image-for-image definition of what it would like to communicate as it would be unnatural, not suiting the blog/vlog or the blogger/vlogger.

3. PUBLIC VIEW: CITY PROMOTION BY BRAND AMBASSADORS

Cities have also started to use influencers in their marketing. A survey by PlaceBrandObserver (2017) found that people engaged in place branding expect that the significance of this tool will increase in the future, and it will become an important way of the cities’ promotion and image building. In fact, it is possible to achieve higher reach this way than through some more traditional means of marketing communication today – even if this requires the involvement of multiple influencers at the same time (Econsultancy.com 2018).

As an article by millionmetrics.com (2017) points out, the effect of influencers is increased by the fact that users *consider them as some acquaintance or friend*, and view the content of their posts as a *personal recommendation*. Therefore their influence is much greater than that of a traditional marketing communications solution or a traditional celebrity.

People are always skeptical if the tourism board of the a city communicates how fantastic its sights are, but they think that it is credible if an influencer does so (Forbes.com (2018). What is more, PMYB (2019), a British influencer marketing agency has also showed – even if in a somewhat disputable way – that *the more influencers you use (including travel bloggers in particular), the more people consider visiting the place.*

In this connection, Development Counsellors International (DCI 2019) goes as far as to highlight that Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube has revolutionized the way destination marketing organizations must operate.

3.1. Best practice #1: Eindhoven

Eindhoven is a particularly good example that must be mentioned among international best practices. The city is characterized by developed industry and is well known for it, but its cultural and tourism values are less known as a result of its categorization as an 'industrial city'. Therefore, Eindhoven has organized several '*Another city trip*' tours for influencers in recent years. The aim of the tour in 2018 (possibly the best of them) was to get influencers use Instagram Stories to create contents that present Eindhoven authentically. 16 Flemish influencers were involved in Belgium with a total reach of 750.000 people domestic and worldwide.

The influencers received a mysterious trip participation opportunity: they boarded a bus in Antwerp, but did not know the destination yet – the only thing they knew was that they would be taken on a 48-hour surprise journey. They realized only after starting the ride on the bus that Eindhoven would be their destination.

Another unique aspect of the 48-hour visit was that the organizers also prepared *personalized programmes besides group events*, and the *customized activities* corresponded to the themes that the influencers usually covered – one of them was taken to a coffee/tea tasting, another to a sewing factory, a third one to a museum, etc.

It even happened that influencers could see themselves on outdoor advertising platforms as digital billboards – which of course lead to many posts as they could make videos/photos of themselves, so to speak. The original aim was to make each influencer post 10 Instagram Stories, resulting in a total of 160 posts. By comparison, the result was 511 Stories which were viewed 7.8 million times in total by the influencers' followers.

The campaign was widely acclaimed in advertising competitions and awards – it also won two titles at the Influencer Marketing Award in London in the categories 'Best Travel Campaign' and 'Most Creative Influencer Marketing Campaign'. Besides, they outperformed brands such as National Geographic or AXE.

The awards rewards influencer marketing campaigns that *focus on both the brand and the consumer*, are driven by *creativity and innovation*, and set *clear and transparent aims and key performance indicators*. (Eindhoven365.nl 2019a)

During the 'Another City Trip' campaign they achieved the following results: the number of Instagram followers increased by 23.4%, which included a particularly massive attention outside The Netherlands which reached 46%. Eindhoven News reported that they experienced a 124% increase of website traffic from Belgium, and the number of unique visitors grew by 38% (Eindhovennews.com 2019). They achieved this without any payment to influencers – opinion leaders created the contents 'from their heart' and not because they had a contract for it (Innovationorigins.com 2019). More importantly, however, Eindhoven put itself on the map of tourism with this influencer campaign, the jury of the awards said.

During another round of the 'Another City Trip' campaign, they invited 17 international vloggers to present Eindhoven's values to them through many programmes that required their active participation: cycling together, handicraft sessions, market visits and of course the

consumption of various tasty foods and drinks. As the video explains, they wished to convey the 'energy' of the city with a dynamic programme of 24 hours. The city marketing department gathered several partners for the project, therefore these appearances helped both the city of Eindhoven and its partners to receive coverage. This Another City Trip campaign also received several awards in competitions such as the contest of the American Content Marketing Institute, the Dutch Interactive Awards or the German Design Award (Eindhoven365.nl 2019a).

As the example of Another City Trip Eindhoven shows, it is very important to have a good 'scenario' for the day or days when the influencers are in the city, which requires the involvement of several partners. It is worth organizing as many active programmes as possible that could provide post topics – unique foods and drinks are always a great theme.

The fourth and latest 'Another City Trip' campaign ran in September 2019. This time, the people 'in the crosshairs' were German opinion leaders – mostly from North Rhine-Westphalia – and of course, their followers. This German region is so close to Eindhoven that it is worth visiting the city for as little as one day, without any overnight stay. It is relatively short distance away, therefore it is easy to get there by train.

The six influencers invited spent 48 hours in the city which they mostly explored by bicycle. Besides targeting German opinion leaders, selection criteria also included people who primarily vlog or blog about design. The result of the weekend was 300 Instagram stories and posts, and there were several interactions by the influencers' followers.

At the same time, Eindhoven also started an online marketing and social media marketing campaign in the German region to provide further support for Another City Trip. In the campaign they used Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Google Ads and native advertising, and their content is also associated with influencers (Eindhoven365.nl 2019b). This is also true because *we might admire a certain city, but we are attached to people, and a combination of the two creates success*. Therefore it is extremely important to include people in advertisements – and this is also true for online advertising.

3.2. Best practice #2: Helsinki

We may also mention another good example: Helsinki, the capital of Finland. The local tourism board called Visit Helsinki invited bloggers, vloggers and instagrammers who created posts about tourism, startups, education and the creative industry. The influencers spent 3-6 days in a studio apartment in the Finnish capital, took part in programmes organized for them, and created content based on their experiences. The name of the initiative was *Helsinki Secret Residence*, and the hashtags they used were #helsinkisecret and #myhelsinkiresidence.

3.3. Best practice #3: The Hague

The Hague in the Netherlands opted for a similar solution: *the city furnished a so-called 'blogger house' or 'blogger holiday home' for the off-season period in tourism*, when seaside houses are empty anyway. Bloggers were invited to cover the widest possible range of topics, therefore a great variety of publications were created – and lots of them, as their number is more

than a hundred. The solution also won an award: the people behind the idea and the people implementing it were given the Dutch Marketing Innovation Award.

3.4. Best practice #4: Miami

Nevertheless, it does not necessarily take a city to organize such campaigns. In the case of Miami, a boutique hotel called Circa 39 undertook this task. As early as 2014, they organized a 'vloggers and vagabonds' event where they invited top Youtubers and asked them to create various contents about Miami. Meanwhile, the Circa 39 Hotel was their headquarters, therefore most of the time it was also featured in the video. Their quality contents still attract new guests to the hotel and the city. (PBMV 2019)

4. ONLINE VIEW: 'INSTAGRAMMABILITY' – A NEW TRAVEL GUIDE EDITED BY INFLUENCERS

As the example from Eindhoven shows, they expected Insta stories from influencers, that is, Instagram played a prominent role in the project. Of course the city itself must 'comply' when the place is a potential destination – it is increasingly important how '*Instagram-compatible*' it is. A separate term, '*instagrammability*' was created in the international literature for this aspect (Adweek.com 2018). Data revealed that *40% of the new generation considers this a priority* when selecting their newest destination (Forbes.com 2018). Therefore it is more important than aspects such as travel and accommodation expenses, local cuisine, and even the price level of alcoholic drinks available in the city. What is most surprising is that tourist attractions rank last, suggesting that they are the least important aspect. This means that *it is more important that something looks great on Instagram rather than being a real tourist attraction* – although the two often overlap. In this connection, some people go as far as to say that *Instagram has become a new 'travel guide'*.

4.1. Best practice #5: Lake Wanaka

New trends create an *opportunity for less known places to put themselves on the map* as a result of their Instagram compatibility. Examples include Lake Wanaka, a settlement in New Zealand which has been almost completely unknown, but more and more people would like to visit it because of the Insta photos published in social media. All this was no accident, of course: the local tourism bureau invited opinion leaders such as photographer Chris Burkard who has 3.5 million Instagram followers (Cntraveler 2016). As a result of all this, the number of tourists visiting the place has increased at a higher rate than other New Zealand destinations. It is interesting to see that brand new jobs have been created by tourism bureaus as a result of the importance of Instagram. One of these jobs is 'Instagram drone photo and video professional' – even if not as a full-time job everywhere.

5. CITIES' VIEW: RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING THE ENGAGEMENT OF TRAVEL VLOGGERS AND TRAVEL INFLUENCERS

In 2019 the website of Firebelly Marketing published an interesting post titled '*How To Get Travel Influencers To Visit Your City*'. As the article suggests, the best way is to create a compensation package based on modules which you can offer to influencers based on their overall clout, followers and the social media channels they actively use. It is important not to offer all the categories below to each and every influencer you contact; it is better to use these categories as a tiered compensation plan.

Provide swag bags: As a bare minimum, put together a swag bag for travel influencers visiting your city with local products and branded items that you can only get there. It works as a nice welcome gift for influencers, and gives exposure to products and brands placed in the bag.

Offer gift cards and discounts: Most local places will be willing to donate these to you if you tell them they are going to influencers that will talk about them on social media, getting them just as much exposure as the city. Participation in this activity may be especially useful for restaurants and catering facilities, but it may be also interesting for museums, cultural institutions, gift shops, and so on.

Provide accommodations: If it takes travel influencers a longer time to get to the city, or they wish to stay for more days, a night or two in a hotel is a great option for compensation. This gives influencers more time to explore the city. This can also be done in cooperation with a specific hotel as influencers will almost certainly create posts about their accommodation.

Cover incurring travel expenses: To provide even more compensation, you may also offer to cover travel expenses. This may be especially important in the case of influencers from abroad. In such cases you should calculate petrol costs, bus/train ticket costs or maybe air ticket costs, and offer money accordingly.

General compensation may also be considered: When all of the above tools are not enough because you are working with a more prominent influencer, you may offer additional compensation based on the work you are asking them to do. You may add in money on top of the above compensation modules for promised social media posts, blogs, videos, etc. However, as an article by Adweek points out, this must be handled very carefully. Authenticity and credibility are especially important in the case of influencer marketing: if the followers see that the person only posts about the specific place because he/she was paid for it, these posts may backfire on the city. It may be bad for both the city/destination and the influencer if the followers do not feel passion in the content (Adweek.com 2018).

Encourage return: A single visit by an influencer may be successful for the city, but consistency, long-term work and some 'repetition' may bring even better results. The destination, for example, might offer a quarterly trip to an influencer, allowing him/her to provide updates on the city and its programmes in each season (PR Daily 2019). Through this, the influencer becomes a kind of city ambassador.

6. INNER VIEW: THE ROLE OF INFLUENCERS LIVING IN A PARTICULAR CITY

It should be noted that in the case of cities, influencer marketing does not only mean that we invite influencers to visit the city as tourists. In fact, *an influencer living in the city and dealing with the city may be even more important*, as the Brand Urban Agency (2017) points out. In such cases, influencers are a kind of ambassadors for the settlement or a part of it. They are passionate about their city and always take the opportunity to communicate about it.

A new term, *'urban influencers'* was also created. The point is that these influencers follow the motto *'sharing is caring'* and share all the information about their city that they consider important and of public interest. In such cases, the target group may also be tourists, but the focus is more on local citizens as the things that they hear or read in the content produced by the influencers affects their behaviour.

In terms of city marketing, the questions are: 'What makes locals feel good in their city or a part thereof?', 'What makes them live there longer, what justifies their decision?' We may also ask 'What are the things that motivate others to move to the specific city or city part?' – because these things can be authentically explained by a local.

6.1. The role of celebrities in city branding

These influencers may be people who are famous for their professional career. One example is director Danny Boyle, who has many ties to East London – he draws attention to the Shuffle Festival which he is involved in each year.

The Spangen neighbourhood of Rotterdam in The Netherlands is popularized by the rap group Broderliefde– they mention the community in almost every interview.

International examples also include the Red Hot Chili Peppers whose songs often mention their roots in Los Angeles and the band members also refer to their love for their hometown in interviews. They have referenced the state of California, Los Angeles or Hollywood in at least a dozen of their songs (Louder 2015) and even mention their love for Los Angeles during concerts (Los Angeles Times 2017).

Hungarian examples include the hip-hop formation Halott Pénz ('Dead Money') from the city of Pécs, and rapper Sub Bass Monster originating from Gyulafirátót.

Besides celebrities, people blogging or vlogging about their beloved city may also shape the reputation and image of a settlement – this includes people who were born or raised in the city and people who moved to the place later and fell in love with it.

6.2. Best practice #6: Anchorage

There are examples when local entrepreneurs initiate a project like this, *asking local citizens to help them make the place more attractive by explaining why they like to live there*. The example of Anchorage (United States) was a great success. Every citizen of the city became an influencer as all of them could send in photos or stories to the Instagram page. Some content created in the 'I love Anchorage' project was later presented in exhibitions across the country, and it also

won awards. However, it was more important that they achieved the original goal: they attracted employees and settlers to the city (Brand Urban Agency 2017).

7. SUMMARY

Brands represent value and influence development opportunities for their owners. The examination of spatial characteristics is one of the first things to do if we assess a corporate or a city. Considerations of economic and social decisions depend on geography. In the case of national and local governments, these actions and policies make up the geoeconomic strategy. Tourism and global image – strongly interconnected in practice but not equal – are much more weighty than shown by figures of statistical reports, e.g. the contribution of travel and tourism to GDP.

In times of tight competition for attention and constantly changing consumer behavior, brand managers who do not want to lag behind must keep the pace. The content and its packaging should be unique and customizable. Furthermore, there is a need for experience regarding delivery. Generation Z, the new primary target group of the marketing managers of private and public organizations relies on customer reviews and ratings, not to mention the influencers' recommendations. Their sympathy is measured in likes, comments and shares that can be converted into currencies.

The present study introduced best practices as thought-provoking 'appetizers' for corporate brand managers and policy makers already working with influencers or planning to do so. The authors believe that the novel marketing method is even more complex than the well-trying campaigns of the past. As the abovementioned best practices show, brand owners not only need to invest time and money in developing the message and providing it to the influencer (the 'contractor'), but they also need to have knowledge of the influencer and establish a unique connection with him/her to make the story credible. Investment is important not only financially but also in connection with the influencer and the transformation of a content to make it 'Instagram compatible' and/or rich in unique customer experience.

Successful projects prove that the costs and efforts are worth the price by and large. Lake Wanaka, an almost unknown settlement in New Zealand became the country's top tourist destination following the buzz created by social media influencers, similarly to the case of Eindhoven, which is now known not only as an industrial city, and is visited by many because of its tourist attractions and heritage.

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