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Pay to Play: Are Blogger Relations Damaging a Fundamental Aspect of PR Practice?

The days of the blogger 'freebie' are fading away in the fashion world, as PRs are needing to dip into their pockets if they are to work with these influential content creators. However, if content is becoming paid for, what differentiates us from advertisers? This article explores how bloggers are emerging into journalists, how PRs can effectively work alongside them to create beneficial symbiotic relationships, and what consequential affect this has on the industry as we traditionally know it.

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INTRODUCTION

Blogging has reformed the PR profession (Solis & Breakenridge 2009) due to the realisation that bloggers hold a significant influence, arguably more so than our journalist counterparts. As PR practitioners, we are required to have the skills and expertise to target communications to our desired audiences, via the platforms that will reach them in the most effective way. (Tench & Yeomans 2009). Therefore, as the blogosphere is increasing and traditional media declining, efforts should be focused on forming relationships with these powerful influencers. The nature of a blog offers the readers the opportunity to engage with the content and communicate with the author (Larraufie & Sommer 2015), which differs from traditional media. Thus, if brands are to utilise bloggers to disseminate their messages and products, then this facilitates and enhances two-way communication, by providing a channel of communication for a company and their publics (Wright & Hinson 2008).

THE POWER OF BLOGGERS

It is not new to point to the fact that consumers are reading fewer print publications (Forbes

2014), where media is consumed in the form of online content, with blogs playing a prominent part in this (Troiano 2006). 409 million people view more than 22.6 billion blog pages each month (Wordpress 2016), where bloggers do not just gain attraction from their official blog pages, they are also accumulating thousands and even millions of followers on popular social media platforms, Twitter and Instagram. This is where they publish a majority of their content that commonly mirrors a personal style blog, where the author captures and uploads photos posing in different outfits (Marwick 2013). The most successful international fashion blogger, Chiara Ferragani, has a staggering 5.8 million followers viewing her Instagram content (Instagram 2016), more than the daily readerships of several news and magazine publications.

There is no denying that the world of blogging has become a modern phenomenon, where the influence they possess, particularly over the 16-24 female millennial, cannot be ignored (Mintel 2016). Fashion bloggers are even considered role models to some, where their personal style is admired and emulated (Kulmala et al. 2013). 45% of those who engage with bloggers have bought a product after a blogger's recommendation (Mintel 2015), thus highlighting their influential power and their ability to provide a successful return on investment for companies. This became apparent when US fashion blogger, Parcell of Pink Peonies, drove \$1million in sales for online retailer Nordstrom in 2014 (WDD 2016). When considering these figures, it is not surprising that brands are jumping at the chance to work with these significant influencers. A report published by Mintel (2016), drew attention to the role fashion blogs are playing in overriding the traditional glossy magazines, where the inspirational qualities they once emitted, has now transitioned to the fashion blogger in the eyes of the consumer. This therefore raises the question as to what role traditional journalists have in shaping media content for this age group, where, particularly in the fashion industry, bloggers can be seen as a considerable threat (Huffington Post 2016).

BLOGGERS VS JOURNALISTS

The blurred line that defines a blogger and a journalist has been a topic of conversation amongst the communications industry for several years (The Conversation 2011). The emergence of the blogosphere has caused those to re-evaluate the nature of journalism, as blogs offer a gateway of opportunity for people to become creators of online content, despite not being bound by the same rules and regulations journalists are governed by (Ji & Sheehy 2010). As bloggers entertain and inform their readers, this draws parallels to the role traditional journalists play (Alonzo 2005), yet consumers supposedly trust bloggers more than they do journalists (PR Daily 2015) due to their authentic and individualistic qualities (Marwick 2013). Increasingly, bloggers are sharing the same privileges journalists work hard to achieve, especially in the fashion industry. Bloggers sitting on the front row at fashion week has become an often occurring sight, where they are valued for their role in providing real-time coverage to keep their audience informed throughout (International Business Times 2016). Attending exclusive events, as well as receiving free products and outfits to review, is all something that can be expected once entering onto the fashion blogging stage. They have become a crucial component of the fast fashion industry, who

have a direct impact on consumption (Larraufie & Sommer 2015). Yet, despite bloggers not having the editing constraints journalists have to abide by, and the bombardment of press releases (Larraufie & Sommer 2015), a fundamental difference between them is that bloggers are often paid to post content, and even attend events in some cases (Waddington & Earl 2012), whereas journalists do not. The blogging industry in the UK commands an estimated £21m in fees from brand partnerships (PR Week 2015), where British bloggers have been reported to demand between £200 to £5000 to post a sponsored picture on Instagram, depending on their following (The Debrief 2015). Even those mid-tier bloggers with a smaller following are starting to realise the potential of getting a paid placement (Smart Insights 2015), where sending a few freebies in return for an endorsement will simply not be enough. If brands want female fashion bloggers to model their products, they have to pay for it, along with paying for their travel to and from events (PR Week 2012).

To utilise the example of Chiara Ferragani again, she earns £6million a year from various endorsements, events and collaborations, where her success and influence has recently made her the face of Amazon fashion (Evening Standard 2016). The world of blogging is therefore becoming increasingly expensive, and companies will inevitably have to pay out if they want to work with the best in the business (PR Week 2012).

INTEGRATING BLOGGERS INTO PR STRATEGY

The practice of public relations is constructed by the relationship with journalists (Young 2012). However, to echo the words of Young (2012), in order for the future of media relations to progress with the fast evolving media landscape, key influencers have to be identified, who will essentially act like journalists. Thus, instead of solely focusing efforts to work with journalists, PR professionals need to continue embracing and growing their blogger relations (Smith 2011) - a term referring to the creation of specialised campaigns to target select bloggers (Solis & Breakenridge 2009). Adding bloggers into a PR strategy provides clients with a gateway into a bloggers committed network (Whittle 2012) and creates a relationship between the client and their publics, due to the bloggers ability to enhance credibility and fuel conversation (Smith 2011).

A fundamental consideration for selecting the right bloggers is to decide whether they are the right 'fit' for the client and the campaign (Holmes Report 2016). This involves conducting prior research on the bloggers content and readership, to see if it will serve an impactful purpose to the campaigns goals and objectives. Companies usually only consider reach - and yes, the number of followers a blogger has is extremely important for PRs to get their messages across to the masses, but the blogger has to be relevant. A good example of blogger and brand relevance was when fashion brand, Amanda Wakeley, signed British health and nutrition blogger, Ella Woodward- commonly known as Deliciously Ella to many, to be the face of their SS16 campaign. Initially, this may have been viewed as a strange fit considering Ella not being an acclaimed fashion blogger, but instead associated with food and nutrition. However, it was a savvy business move on the brands behalf to utilise Ella in their ad campaigns and to front press interviews, in order to attract her predominant

younger female following. Ella's clean cut traditionally British image aligns with the designer's affluent British style, where having a healthy model at the forefront of their campaign stood the brand against the fashion industry's negative associations with unhealthy models (The Telegraph 2016).

Effective blogger relations have to be built on respect, understanding and investing in long-term relationships (Solis & Breakenridge 2009). PR practitioners believe that their media relations skills are transferrable when working with bloggers, but remarkably they are not (Waddington & Earl 2012). Bloggers want to be treated differently to journalists, and expect pitches to be tailored to them that will be relevant to the blog and of interest to their loyal readers (PR Week 2015). As increasing amounts of companies are reaching out to bloggers, after realising the positive impact they can have on their business strategy, bloggers are starting to ask "what's in it for me?" (Holmes Report 2016). A study conducted by Smith (2010) found that bloggers were extremely hostile towards PR practitioners that considered them an easy option for 'free publicity'.

Therefore, in order to create mutually beneficial long-term relationships with bloggers, PRs should ensure that they are financially rewarded. However, the question can be raised as to what effect this has on the future of the PR industry.

DOES THIS MEAN THE END OF EARNED MEDIA?

Public relations is defined by the term earned media (Theaker 2012), which is a fundamental and historical difference that sets PR apart from the other components in the marketing mix that require paid for placements. Traditionally, PR is based around editorial persuasion (PR Week 2014) and involves the creation of campaigns that incorporates stunts, events, interviews and news stories that will get pitched to a journalist, or hopefully picked up, for the return of a tangible piece of free coverage (Tench & Yeomans 2009). However, with the emergence and rise of the blogger, the PR industry has quickly decided that they want to work with these new content creators, in the same way they have worked with the traditional media (Waddington 2012). Yet as it has now become customary for bloggers to be paid for their part in the promotion of a brand, if PRs are to integrate them into their PR strategy, this surely blurs the line between advertising and PR, as this consequentially becomes a form of paid for media.

Those that argue that PRs should not pay bloggers for their promotional activity, believe so because this contradicts the reason why clients hire PRs in the first place. Clients want PR professionals who can secure coverage through innovative, proactive and compelling campaigns, not just by dipping into their budgets to pay directly for the coverage (PR Week 2012). Gone will be the days of the painstaking pitching efforts that epitomises the work of a PR practitioner. Others against the notion of paying bloggers in PR refer back to the industry wide taboo on financially contributing towards a journalists travel expenses, and even the occasional lunch. However, if the two disciplines are so similar after all, it is questioned as to why this has become acceptable to pay one and not the other (PR Week 2012).

For the PR industry to modernise itself, this involves broadening beyond traditional media relations which will be imperative for future success (Waddington 2012). Effectively working with bloggers will open up new doors for clients, especially in the fashion industry. It cannot be ignored however, that with the changing media landscape, “you have to pay to play” with blogger relations, and if this means a shake-up to the traditional PR practice, then PRs are going to be needing a bigger budget.

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