



Journal of Promotional Communications

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://promotionalcommunications.org/index.php/pc/index>

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To cite this article: Lediard, M. 2017. Forget Traditional PR: Build your Brand through the Affiliate Channel, *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 5(1), 72-77

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Molly Lediard

Forget Traditional PR: Build your Brand through the Affiliate Channel

This article is aimed at PRs who work for smaller brands who want to raise their profile and build more of an online or digital presence for their publics. With specific reference to content affiliates, it helps to provide insight on how partnering with the affiliate marketing channel can help build brand awareness and how they can ensure their brand reputation isn't damaged. It will also discuss the importance of having strong relationships with affiliates. A case study on fashion brand Motel Rocks will also be used to help illustrate how a small fashion brand managed to build brand awareness and became a globally recognised name through the affiliate channel.

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AN INSIGHT

Digital media has become a central part of our lives and our relationships with people and brands rely heavily on online content. This means that for brands, there is more innovative ways to promote new products but it also means there is more competition to stand out.

The evolution of digital media means that PR professionals today now have to consider the web and what people are doing on there. Many consumers use the web as a tool to seek inspiration on what to buy before they purchase. It has been found that 61% of consumers turn to content affiliates to give guidance on what they should buy before purchasing (Charlton 2015) and to find out more about new products and brands on the market.

As more people are now turning to online content to seek new information, it is important that PR focuses on online visibility or digital opportunities; something that traditional PR fails to do (Kowan 2012; Morgan 2015).

WHAT IS AFFILIATE MARKETING?

Affiliate marketing has been described as a 'hidden powerhouse of online marketing' that has fast become a billion-pound industry (Whitby, 2015). The term 'affiliate' refers to websites who advertise your brand and receive commission on a cost per acquisition basis (CPA). These websites can include cashback sites such as Quidco, voucher code sites like Vouchercloud, loyalty sites such as Nectar and content sites such as blogs.

All of these websites provide incentive to purchase from brands and help raise brand awareness depending on the type of affiliate and what they are offering. For example, voucher code, cashback and loyalty affiliates tend to provide consumers with an incentive to purchase by offering discounts and cashback to customers.

Furthermore, bloggers taking on the role of affiliates has been identified as an important trend in affiliate marketing because it means they are able to link their recommendations to the places where they can be purchased (Nichols 2014). This makes it easier for the customer to get straight to the product they may want to buy rather than typing in the URL and searching through an online store. Also, bloggers are able to provide consumers with more detail into what products brands are selling which can help raise brand awareness, particularly if a brand isn't very well known (Lu et al 2014).

BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN PR AND AFFILIATE MARKETING

Moving away from traditional PR exposure in print and online, blogging and content marketing has proven a way for PR's to gain exposure for their brands.

Affiliate Summit (2014) explained how PR and affiliate marketing can be a 'virtuous cycle' as they can both help each other. Firstly, affiliate marketing can increase brand awareness through the use of content and bloggers and as a result, this can lead to earned media such as unpaid mentions by press or bloggers as people become exposed to the brand. Likewise, strong brand awareness created from PR campaigns, blogger outreach and media mentions can help to increase affiliate sales. Using Calvin Klein as an example, a blogger may post about the brand and write 'as seen on Kendall Jenner in the Calvin Klein campaign' which can help generate sales. It therefore works as a win/win situation.

AFFILIATE MARKETING AND BRAND REPUTATION

The question could be raised on how affiliate marketing may affect your brand's reputation. To ensure brand reputation is not damaged through affiliate marketing, you can ensure that you select affiliates who are a good fit for the brand which therefore

means selecting affiliates who reflect their brand values (Gutierrez 2015). However, as all affiliates are being paid on a CPA basis, some of you might ask yourselves 'because they are being paid, will this hinder our brands reputation?'

The answer is no. In fact, a lot of consumers turn to affiliates such as blogs and content sites because they perhaps connect with the writer or because they may be seen as more 'trustworthy'. This is because people enjoy reading blogs rather than magazines because it's coming from a specific person who can give their own point of view on things (Marwick, 2013). This was also highlighted in a survey by Affilinet (2015) who found that blogs are more trusted than journalists.

However, even though their content may now have affiliate links within it, it doesn't necessarily have to mean that they are less credible. To put this into perspective, many top fashion bloggers such as *The Blonde Salad* and *Damsel in Dior* first built their blogs on their interest in fashion and weren't being paid for writing content which perhaps proved its authenticity to readers.

Even though their blogs have now turned into a full time job and brands pay them if readers click through their blog to make a purchase, it doesn't have to mean that readers will think less of your brand or that the content is less authentic. If anything, it's important that as PRs you know the difference between bloggers who are in it for the free products and money and those who genuinely have a keen interest in the brands they are promoting and the sector they tend to post about; such as fashion, travel, and tech.

This also applies to other affiliates too, just because they offer discounts or cashback it doesn't have to affect your brands reputation. If it fits in with your brand values, it's fine. Take Topshop for example, they have a huge student market and offer student discount all year round. This makes the brand much more credible to students unlike other brands who don't offer any discounts.

CREATING BRAND AWARENESS AND REACHING NEW PUBLICS

Using affiliates, such as bloggers, is a great way to gain exposure for your brand as their role is to try to new products, write about them and publicise them. As many people use the web in search for inspiration on products to purchase, they may be inspired to see that content affiliates are talking about a new brand and may be more motivated to try it.

Affiliate marketing will also enable your brand to reach out to a new audience who look for inspiration online by using affiliates that are well established and have a large amount of followers from your brand's target market (Heathcote 2013). The publics for affiliate campaigns would be those who engage with the affiliates who are effectively acting as brand ambassadors. Therefore, affiliates will be reaching out to what Grunig and Repper (1992) have referred to as "latent publics" who become active after being prompted by an incentive. For example, a brand's publics may look at blogs but aren't actively interested in any particular brands, but also aren't passive to them. Once they see something to make them interested in a particular brand, such as a blogger's product review and or a special 10% off discount code, they may be persuaded to buy

particular products from this brand, or be inclined to look at other products on offer by clicking through the bloggers affiliate link.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS WITH AFFILIATES

Relationship management within PR, as discussed by Broom et al (2000), has always been a key part of PR to ensure that strong relationships between publics and PRs are improved and maintained (Edwards 2009). It is also important to apply this to relationships with clients and in this case, affiliates.

Ensuring that you have a good relationship with affiliates can mean that a campaign will be more effective. Whitby (2015) explains how in the fashion industry, affiliate marketing now offers a way of developing brand advocates and building brands through fashion blogs and other fashion portals. Plus, whilst more time may be spent building strong relationships, it can be rewarding for the brand in the long-term which will be getting quality exposure through content affiliates such as bloggers (Whitby, 2015).

Your relationship with affiliates and bloggers in particular can help you to identify the difference between those who have a keen interest in your sector and those who may be in it for the money and freebies. It also means that you can ensure bloggers who endorse your brand are genuinely passionate about the products they offer and have a following of people who are influenced by this. Ensuring you have a good relationship with affiliates means they may be more motivated to continue to post content which is supportive and relevant for the brand.

AFFILIATE MARKETING & PR IN ACTION

Using an example of Digital PR agency etailPR and their client Motel shows how integrating affiliate marketing and PR can contribute to brand reputation and brand awareness. It also shows the benefits of having strong relationships with affiliates and how this can contribute towards an effective PR and affiliate marketing strategy.

Motel Rocks is a women's fashion brand that was established in the late 90s and as the brand started to grow they wanted to implement a strategy to strengthen the brand and increase brand awareness in the fashion industry.

In order to do this, their brand objectives focused specifically on selecting top fashion affiliates to help promote the brand. Their strategy included choosing key affiliates who their team had strong relationships with such as voucher code websites, shopping product feed websites and in particular fashion content sites and bloggers.

As a result of launching their affiliate campaign, Motel is now a globally recognised brand through affiliate channels in Europe, US, Australia, New Zealand and Asia which bloggers played a key part in (etailPR 2016). It also meant that revenue increased by 1675% since the campaign launched in 2009. Therefore, showing that using affiliates to blog about the brand they were able to not only increase brand awareness in the UK but also spread it globally.

This example also shows that from developing strong relationships with affiliates and having control over a network of affiliates that can promote the brand, it can have a more effective impact on how the brand is perceived. As PR practitioners create relationships with affiliates it means they can understand which ones are most influential and most relevant to the brand which will result in them reaching more people and having a larger impact on the fashion industry.

Additionally, the brand now has a positive brand reputation in the fashion industry and is seen as a leading British fashion label as well as being a brand that is dedicated to offering people new trends and unique, stylish clothing.

HOW WILL THIS HELP PR PRACTITIONERS?

To summarise, it can be advised that integrating affiliate marketing into your PR strategy can help you get the results you want through an online channel. As you know, PR is dynamic and has to keep up to date with changing trends. Therefore, by partnering with other channels such as affiliates, it means you can offer your brand the exposure they want and reach out to new and existing publics, as well as raise brand awareness and maintain a good brand reputation.

Even though affiliate marketing revolves around getting paid through the CPA model, it doesn't have to mean that it is the sole reason as to why it may encourage affiliates to post about your brand. As you develop strong relationships with affiliates, you may soon come to learn that they have a strong passion for the brand.

Plus, the use of affiliate links in high quality content means that readers get content for free and your brand gets the promotion that they want (Affiliate Summit 2014). Therefore, if you want to raise you client's brand profile online, affiliate marketing is definitely the way forward.

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