

The
Seven Pillars
of
Communications
Wisdom

Preface

Influencer engagement is one of the most widely-used tactics in marketing these days, practised by almost everyone, from PRs to SEOs, social marketers to (gulp) spammers.

But that doesn't mean that everyone is doing it *right*.

Going by the thoughts shared by digital influencers Cision UK has interviewed over the past five years, a large number of comms people continue to make mistakes with such engagement. This is largely because the very rules of engagement have changed, and continue to do so in pace with the spiralling growth of digital media technologies and tools. So what are the new rules of the digital game? Is the press release really dead? How should you talk to these new influencers, and what are the ideas most likely to engage them?

To help understand what is expected of marketers, we've collated the most relevant thoughts and opinions from some of the biggest digital influencers to have appeared on the Cision blog in recent months, in our very own seven pillars of wisdom...

First Pillar: It's all "About Me"

It's often said that the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was the last person to have read everything there was to read – but Coleridge never had to cope with blogs. With the blogosphere so vast and in such a state of continual evolution – old blogs running out of steam and new blogs emerging every day – it's pretty much impossible to read everything, even within your areas of expertise.

But even if you can't stay on top of everything, you cannot afford for this to be reflected in your outreach. You might have used a system like CisionPoint to create a long list of potentials, but it's essential to interrogate that long list and cross-reference it with the original sources. You won't have time to read every post of every blog – but you can certainly find your way to the "About Me" sections (not least because they're invariably summarised in CisionPoint bios!).

As Naomi, author of the blog, *Tattooed Mummy*, puts it:

It's nice when a PR has taken the time to read a blog post or two and the 'About Me' page, so that, for example, they don't ask me to review nappies. (I have a teen daughter!)

Second Pillar: Don't you know who I am?

Says Kay Burgess, author of one of parenting blog Mummy B:

One time a PR company got me confused with another blogger and even when I corrected them they continued mistaking me for someone else. As you can imagine I soon lost interest in them.

Yes, you're busy. Everybody is, and those influencers probably have a better understanding of the pressures you're under and the ways you have to work as result. In short, they understand that mistakes happen.

As Michelle Pannell, author of Mummy from the Heart, says of comms people:

Yes, some of them send me press releases which are completely irrelevant to my blog but I find a friendly email back normally removes me from the list and we can move on.

Not checking facts and getting names and locations wrong is obviously very bad practice, but sugar-coating bulk emails is much worse.

Be honest right from the start! insists Mary Key, author of Keynko– A Crafty Family:

Don't flannel me with such things as: 'I read you blog and just loved it'. The chances are you didn't and we can all see through it – particularly when you then use the wrong name or link!

And Neville Hobson, the most influential blogger in Cision's Top 10 UK PR Blogs, has some cautionary words for the harried mass-mailer:

Don't send bulk emails dressed up as personal communication which have little or no relevance to me, my blog or the PR's client. You should see my black list of individual and corporate names, all of which should know better!

Third Pillar: Two way street

Jen Stanbrook, author of the interior design blog Love Chic Living:

If PRs want to collaborate, they need to have a clear idea on the campaign or project, how they'd like me to be involved and what they are offering in return.

Comms professionals need to be clear about what they want out of influencers and approach them accordingly. Is it a straight forward news article, experiential review or simple recommendation? A press release only takes you so far, and as we've seen, is a potential source of blogger strife – indeed, to such an extent that some influencers refuse to countenance them at all.

Liz Jarvis, author of The Mum Blog:

I never, ever blog from press releases. The pitches that work best for me and The Mum Blog are those that will give me fodder for a great post – for example, being invited to an event that's a good fit with the blog, to meet and interview someone who is a good fit with the blog, or to get involved with a campaign that resonates. It's all about synergy.

Vicki Day, author of the blog MrsD-Daily, goes even further, asking that marketers simply explain their objectives and then leave bloggers to get on with it:

If the PRs' main objective is to maximise coverage and create brand awareness, then that's really all they have to communicate. Bloggers are the best judge of what peaks their readers' interests and gains long-term loyalty, so let them get on with it, and don't force on them short-term attention-grabbing gimmicks.

Such an approach demands much in the way of trust and shouldn't be entered into lightly. But despite the risks, extra time spent working individually with bloggers is likely to take the story that extra mile.

Fourth Pillar: No free lunches

Blogs were originally a digital version of a diary where people wrote 'stuff' – how bad their day was or why they enjoyed eating at a certain restaurant. Marketers picked up on it – for what better way to sell your product than through a real-life user experience?

Now blogging has become a growing, and for some, a lucrative profession and marketers need to acknowledge that like most things in life, there are no free lunches.

Jen Stanbrook tells it as it is:

PRs must not expect me to offer my blog as a platform for promoting their client and expect that I'd do this for free. I'm not saying that every PR has to offer money or a product, far from it, but they do have to respect that I've worked long and hard to build up a readership, a ranking in search engines and a strong following. If they want a part of that for their client they do need to offer some kind of compensation.

As Jen pointed out, the reward doesn't have to be monetary – creative and interesting collaborations which are mutually beneficial can be just as rewarding.

The UK's top mummy blogger, Sally Whittle, author of *Who's the Mummy?* offered some examples:

For me, my blog isn't my job so I want to work with PRs on things that are fun. Sometimes PR campaigns can seem a lot of work for not much return. I prefer to work on things I really enjoy – travel is a big passion and I'm lucky we've been able to do a lot of that, but fun can be found in smaller settings, too – making smoothies with a hotel chef, exploring behind the scenes of a show, riding a new rollercoaster, learning a new skill. Great blog outreach is about creating memories that people want to share on their blogs.

Fifth Pillar: Stay classy

What's worse than not considering compensation for writers promoting your brand? Promising false compensation. Yes, this actually happens.

Amber McNaught, author of fashion blog Forever Amber:

My pet hate at the moment is the constant requests for me (and other bloggers) to create content which is then entered into a competition, in which I'll have a slim chance of being compensated for my work... It feels quite disrespectful to approach someone who blogs professionally and has built up a successful site, and ask them to provide their writing services, plus valuable space on their website, in exchange for the hope of possibly winning a competition. I can't imagine this happening in other industries.

Sixth Pillar: Follow up

PRs are all too familiar with traditional journalistic injunction not to follow up emails – and yet when it comes to bloggers, it seems this rule no longer applies.

Angie Solomon, author of the lifestyle, food and travel blog SilverSpoon London, goes so far as to say that:

A follow up is a good idea... it's easy to miss a press release or invitation in the ether, and a subsequent email or phone call can be really helpful.

A PR Guy's Musings author Stuart Bruce has at least one example of a PR effectively spiking their own story with a lack of follow-up:

Last year I had a gadget to review, which I couldn't get to work. I put it to one side expecting the PR to come back and ask what I thought or why I hadn't posted a review. I just found the gadget while tidying the office and I'd had zero follow up from the PR. Although they had pitched me again and offered another gadget later in the year!

While there is obviously a balance to be struck between over- and under-communicating, digital influencers are on the whole keen to build relationships and look for responsiveness from marketers.

Helen Neale author of parenting site KiddyCharts and round-up editor at BritMums, has an even worse example – where the blogger takes the initiative, only to be ignored:

The worst thing that a PR can do is not answer an approach. I really don't mind if my pitch didn't work, but I would love to hear from them; even if it is a simple: 'Thanks, but no thanks'. I have taken the time to write the pitch, and I get a fair number of emails a day; from press releases to specific offers.

Building successful relationships with influencers requires the same obvious elements as relationships outside of work. It's a question of....

Seventh Pillar: R.E.S.P.E.C.T

Gillian Lee Rose, author of the eponymous fashion blog:

I don't like it when PRs don't respond after they originally contacted you and you've replied. Even if they no longer want to collaborate, I think they should just let you know rather than leave you hanging. It's also bad if they are too pushy.

So that's a lesson on politeness that applies anywhere. Of course, there are more specific ways in which the relationship can founder such as those described by Victoria Jackson, author of fashion, beauty and lifestyle blog I Heart Fashion:

Do not send me images/information which you then realise bloggers can't use. A number of PRs have me on a mailing list which is sent out to national publications and when I ask for images, there is a bar on them until they have been used in magazines.

More than anything, it's a question of marketers being affable, personable and professional in their relationships with digital influencers, extending the same courtesies and respect to them as they would within any other professional relationship.

Indeed, for influence marketing success, it's probably most important to keep in mind the straightforward, elegant wisdom expressed by WitWitWoo author Kate Sutton:

I'll probably be echoing what every other blogger has said before me, and what every blogger will say in the future, but working with bloggers isn't rocket science. Bloggers just want to be treated with respect, the same as anyone in any other profession.