

CHAPTER TEN

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS AN INFLUENCER

IN JUNE 2007, Brian Solis, author and principal at the Altimeter Group, published *The Social Media Manifesto*. A lot of *The Social Media Manifesto* deals with the concept of influence, declaring, “Monologue has given way to dialogue.” But as I’ve started to lay out for you, we don’t influence each other as much as we think we do. The media influences us, and then, stemming from that, we influence each other. This is evident across the Web and can be found on every single platform and in every Web community.

So the following from *The Social Media Manifesto* is not helpful:

*With the injection of social tools into the mix, people now have the ability to impact and influence the decisions of their peers and also other newsmakers. Social media is not a game played from the sidelines. Those who participate will succeed—everyone else will either have to catch up or miss the game altogether. Engage or die.*¹

Yes. It really says, “Engage or die.” I’m not really sure how “monologue has given way to dialogue” can be true if one half of that dialogue is telling you that if you don’t engage, you’ll die. If you figure that one out, you can call me at 518-832-9894.

Let’s be honest: Using connections, getting the media behind you, and having a good product are how the world worked before the Internet got here, and that’s how it’s going to work long after it. The fact that members of the media are obsessed now with what’s being said on Twitter, and wrongly treating it as news does not mean people have any more power than they did before “social media” arrived on the scene. Your participation is optional then, not *mandatory*.

I have seen way too many small businesses, artists, and entrepreneurs who think “social media” will allow them to make a career of doing what they love—the exact thing that the marketers have promised them and then went broke in the process. That’s why it’s important to dispel these myths.

Especially when those myths are so clearly wrong.

MEETING THE INFLUENCERS IS ALMOST AS USEFUL AS MEETING THE METS

Much “social media” marketing advice is geared toward the idea of finding those enchanted “influencers” and having them spread the word about your product for you. It’s a staple of almost every “social media” related publication that’s released. I don’t dispute that people with actual influence exist, possessing a voice that can reach the seventh layer of Hell from the ninth. What I dispute, and I’m not alone as you’re about to see, is that the people who possess this mysterious ability are easily identifiable using services like Klout, and accessed, celebrities notwithstanding. Don’t waste your money trying to find, identify, and influence

these influencers. If what you do is easy to understand, easy to use, easy to share, and it's good, given enough momentum, it will be passed on. (To a point. More on that later.)

The way many marketing authors tell you to network is wrong. Trading business cards and going to conferences only helps them, not you. They want you to go to these conferences because they get paid to speak at them, and in some cases, they're the ones organizing them, meaning they're making a lot of dough by selling conference sponsorships. (Remember: It's called the marketing *industry*.) That's another reason why their advice is geared toward the enterprise-level crowd. Since managing "social media" comes down to "educating" people about it, corporations often lay out a lot of money for their employees to come see the same old crew of marketers talk about the same old platforms. Mashable.com doesn't expect you to cough up the \$499 for a conference ticket; they're charging 499 of your employer's sweet, sweet corporate dollars. And if you think \$499 is overpriced, tickets to the 2010 Web 2.0 Summit cost \$4,195. In 2011, they adjusted their conference-only ticket pricing to a more "reasonable" \$1,545.² Wasn't that nice of them?

Although you could make one or two great connections at these things, you're going to make a lot more useless ones. So, go to the conferences and other events if it's something you want to do, not because it'll be an opportunity to "network" or put your product or idea in front of "influencers." Influencers are overrated and almost entirely nonexistent, at least in the way marketers portray them. Are there influential people? Sure. But no one knows who those people are.

The concept of influencers, in the way marketers define them, comes mostly from Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*, released in 2000.³ One of the theories behind *The Tipping Point* was that the difference between success and failure for something is whether a small group of engaged, energetic, and well-connected people get behind it.

Sound familiar? How often have you heard or read about finding the influencers and targeting them in some way to make your product successful? This is what Gladwell called, in his book, *The Law of the Few*.

There are certainly influential people out there. However, with the exception of those mainstream celebrities whose every word is considered news, we have no idea who they are. Could you meet a major influencer at a conference? Sure. But you could also very well meet one at a nightclub on Long Island.⁴ And especially at conferences designed to bring in employees from different companies—and to make a profit from those companies—the odds aren't looking much better. No offense to my friends working for The Man, but if they had that kind of “influencing” clout, they probably wouldn't be working for The Man in the first place. It's not that the people going to these conferences aren't important; but any power they may possess to make or break you is probably exaggerated.

And it's not just “social media” conferences. The conference crowd generally consists of fans, employees, curious onlookers, and people looking to make a buck (whether they be vendors, sponsors, or even the conference organizers). How much power they possess is again, and mostly, greatly exaggerated. Proof can be found by talking to any Hollywood insider who has seen the launch of a comic book or graphic novel-based movie at the San Diego Comic-Con, a supposed hot bed of “influencers”—and then saw that movie flop. The awesome *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* and the less awesome *Watchmen* films are great examples.⁵ (This is also known as the *Snakes on a Plane* Phenomenon, where a movie, television show, or other product was incredibly hyped all over the Internet and then failed miserably at the box office or in other offline arenas.) As Tucker Max told me about the commercial failure of his otherwise decent movie, “People don't automatically transfer fandom. Meaning, loving a book and loving a movie are different things.”⁶

If the primary user-base of most platforms on the Web (men, 18–49) can't move the needle in a significant way when it comes to translating online buzz into offline results, that should serve as a pretty serious red flag for you about the power of the Internet at large to fuel the success of something without the media or a celebrity's involvement.

ALL THE WORLD ISN'T ATWITTER

Marketers and others like to claim Twitter took off thanks to the South by Southwest Interactive festival in 2007. This was based on the number of tweets that appeared in response to the conference, which is a bit like using a ruler to measure how long that same ruler is.

Twitter.com's overall traffic, at the time it was proclaimed to be a break out success at SXSWi 2007, was never mentioned. Instead you heard stuff like, "One-line one-to-many messaging service Twitter is aflame during the South by Southwest Interactive conference" on Gawker, which was followed by, "Twitter staffers Jack and Alex tell me that the site, which normally carries around twenty thousand messages a day, broke sixty thousand a day this weekend."⁷ And then there was this, from CNET: "According to Laughing Squid blogger Scott Beale, Twitter is 'absolutely ruling' SXSWi. Social software researcher Danah Boyd said Twitter is 'owning' the festival."⁸ And this was before third-party clients like TweetDeck, where Twitter's "power users" now do the bulk of their tweeting, came about. So traffic is key here in determining when Twitter actually "took off."

In that regard, Twitter didn't take off until two year later when, Nielsen reported, Twitter.com's American traffic went from 475,000 unique visitors to almost seven million in the months between February 2008 and February 2009.⁹ The tweets may have increased during the 2007 SXSW festival, particularly among the Cyber Hipsters,

but did the service “take off” in the sense that it became a mainstream thing? No.

Even today it’s debatable how popular Twitter actually is. If Pew’s research is accurate, only 13 percent of all Americans in 2011 were using Twitter.¹⁰ That’s 3,900,000 Americans. Twitter says half of their users log in once a day, and that 40 percent of those “listen” but don’t actually tweet anything. So, as that number appears smaller and smaller, you have to wonder, how mainstream is it really? Just because people know what Twitter is thanks to the media hype¹¹ doesn’t actually mean they use it. I know Axe Body Spray makes women want to molest me, but that doesn’t mean I buy it.

Consider one popular example: The Twitter’s public relations feed, @TwitterComms, reported that Twitter set a “Tweets Per Second” record of 8,868 at 10:35 P.M. Eastern Standard Time on August 28, 2011, the day the 2011 MTV VMAs aired.¹² The time 10:35 P.M. coincides with the moment Beyonce revealed she was pregnant during the show, which was the highest-rated VMAs to air at the time of this writing.¹³ (This record would later be broken during the 2012 Super Bowl. More on that in a second.)

On September 1, 2011, Gary Vaynerchuk recorded a video saying, “Social Media is helping drive television ratings up the roof to all-time highs.” He added, “The virtual water cooler is happening in real time.”¹⁴

This, upon hearing, almost gave me an aneurysm.

As it turns out, the difference in total viewership between the 2010 VMAs and the 2011 VMAs was exactly one million people.¹⁵ If there are about 4 million Americans on Twitter, and only about half of that number logs in once a day, then it’s looking like a stretch that “social media” drove the ratings increase. Some other, more likely, possibilities: The VMAs have been in a ratings upswing since 2007. And the show tends to do well during times of national distress¹⁶ (they had

their highest run of ratings between 9/11 and through the first year of the war in Iraq). (And just like the VMAs, the Super Bowl has also been in a ratings upswing since the economy bottomed out.)

So I'm not sold that social media, and specifically Twitter, did much of anything. Most likely, Twitter and other platforms served as a look into what people were already watching. The fact that ratings were also down for such major events as the 2012 Golden Globes and The State of the Union Address, despite a high volume of tweets during the airing of each, only supports this notion.

Unfortunately, a little thing called math didn't stop the marketers, Cyber Hipsters, and tech companies from jumping on the "Twitter = Ratings" and "Twitter = Influence" bandwagon. In the technology blog Venturebeat, Twitter CEO Dick Costolo argued that the 2012 presidential election would be the "Twitter Election," and that "candidates that don't participate on Twitter while the conversation is happening will be left behind."¹⁷ If that were true, it would be guys like GOP candidate Buddy Roemer, who actively tweeted and interacted with his audience during the nominating process, that led the pack, while Mitt Romney, who barely tweeted, lagged behind in obscurity.

And as Governor Roemer told me, despite articles with titles like "How the Internet Saved Buddy Roemer's Candidacy," which ran on Mashable.com, he was not entirely pleased with the results of some of his "social media" efforts, and stated that while Twitter has good promise, "I would not have chosen Twitter if left to my own devices."¹⁸ Roemer told me he was only using "social media" because the actual media didn't allow him to participate in the numerous Republican debates that were held.

WHO'S YOUR DADDY, AND WHO DOES HE KNOW?

Dr. Duncan Watts, a network-theory scientist and Yahoo! researcher, is most often cited in counterarguments concerning the overvaluation of “influencers.” In 2003, Watts recreated the experiment Malcom Gladwell’s book heavily relied on, “The Six Degrees of Separation” study by social psychologist Stanley Milgram.¹⁹

Dr. Milgram was studying the interconnectedness of people. His experiments asked people in Wichita, Boston, and Omaha to attempt to convey a letter to a stranger in a different city. To do so, they were asked to mail it to someone they know on a first-name basis. That person would then do the same, to a recipient who would do the same, until it arrived at its destination. Milgram concluded, in part, that some people are better connected, and therefore much better than others at passing on messages. Gladwell’s “influencers.”

In Dr. Watt’s recreation of the Six Degrees experiment, he found that, in spreading a message electronically, very few of the 61,000 participants in the study sent their message through one of those influencers.²⁰ This suggests, at least to me, that the influence of the “influencers,” as defined by marketers, is negligible.

But it didn’t take an electronic recreation by Dr. Watts to see how flawed the Six Degrees study was. In looking through Milgram’s notes on the experiment, University of Alaska-Fairbanks professor Judith Kleinfeld found something disturbing.

She told me, “Stanley Milgram and others repeating his work don’t acknowledge the obvious fact that most of the letter chains do not get through. He has not shown that people are connected to each other by six degrees of freedom. Moreover, minorities and low-income groups have much lower chances of getting their letters through as people who are Caucasian or well-off.”²¹

The myth of “influencers” isn’t a new one either. It has been around for half a century. But since *The Tipping Point* came out, marketers have increasingly adopted it into their strategies despite the fact that it was that easy to target a group of influential people and see results . . . well, I’ll let Dr. Watts get the last word on this one:

It’s true that there is a striking difference between our ability to identify influential-seeming people after the fact, and our ability to identify and co-opt them to our purposes in advance. Yet of course, it’s the latter that is important in marketing (and in most other domains). If the stories we tell about influencers don’t help us to predict who they will be in the future, then they’re really just stories. None of this is to say that influence isn’t real, or that some people aren’t more influential than others (although who they are may depend a lot on the specific domain and context)—just that no one (so far) has been able to exploit this observation systematically. I also think that if and when we do learn to identify influencers, we will discover that their influence is less spectacular than certain pop-sociology theories have led us to believe. That doesn’t mean it isn’t a useful thing to try to do, but anyone hoping to trigger the next social epidemic by targeting the key influencers is probably dreaming.²²

So, go to conferences and try to find influencers. By all means. But here’s a novel idea: Go because you want to, and not because you feel obligated to. You will be in a better place to forge real, valuable relationships if you do, and those are what drive business.

And to be clear: Many people in the social media industry who are peddling the modern version of the “influencer” myth believe themselves to be influencers. Otherwise they wouldn’t be talking about useless things like their Klout scores.

Hey, maybe you’ll get lucky and meet that one person who can make

all the difference. But remember that the majority of people attending are there for the same reason, so you might have some competition.

Think of the TED conference, which costs attendees \$6,000 to attend. You go to that sort of thing to meet all the luminaries who regularly appear at TED, but as one attendee pointed out on TechCrunch,

Long story short, from the opening night gala, TED rapidly segregates itself into two distinct groups: Group A (the people everyone would love to meet), and Group B (the people who want to meet those people). The people in Group B spend the entire TED conference running around with business cards, hoping for, you know, five seconds of face time with Sergey Brin, Bill Gates, Steve Wozniak, Cameron Diaz, or the like. The people in Group A, on the other hand, spend most of TED trying to avoid the people in Group B. Put the people in Group A and Group B together in a room (the “opening night” gala is the only time this really happens), and the tension is sometimes palpable.²³

So where can you network with better results? Of the “Big Six,” only one of them is built to interact with strangers in a meaningful way: Twitter. LinkedIn is a close second, but that tends to work better if you already work in a professional setting. LinkedIn is also pretty self-limiting, too. Someone has to introduce you to someone else. On Twitter, you can follow whomever you want.

And although you could make some good connections online—and I can certainly vouch for that—I’ve found *offline* connections to be the most meaningful, beneficial, and long-lasting. Online connections are a lot like the ones you make in elementary school. Everything’s cool until you pull down your pants during the anatomy lesson.

Instead of starting with the conferences, or the strange and inter-

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esting people the Internet has to offer, try starting locally. Start with your friends, then their friends, then people that they know, and keep going from there. You'll find in doing this that you'll almost always hit a connection that not only will be useful, but it'll be someone more reliable and trustworthy than someone you meet online, precisely because it came from a personal referral. (You might also make a friend out of it, something more valuable than a "contact," fan, or follower ever will be.)