

Death to the influencer - a shift in word-of-mouth marketing

By [Samantha Wright](#)

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Influencer. The dirty word of 2017. It's interesting how the landscape shifts so quickly and in such a short period of time.



Samantha Wright, content producer at Tech Girl.

Two years ago, “influencer marketing” was the giant buzzword. Every brand and ad agency was attempting to jump on the train and towards the end of 2016 we saw a host of influencer marketing agencies pop up, while Instagram feeds were populated with well laid-out product placements.

Suddenly anyone with a following over “x number” was thrown a label and demanding large sums of cash for one tweet or “creative fees” for laying out those product shots on Instagram. Fast forward to 2018, and the influencer as we know him or her will die, but the initial thinking behind influencers won't. Bear with me...



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The original attraction of influencer marketing was the ability to access a community of potential customers and speak to them in a language they understood – via the influencer. Said influencer had the community and understood how to engage with them. The original concept of influencer marketing was to convince said influencer to talk to their community about a product or service.

But then it all went wrong.

2017 and some of 2016 was a year of *faux pas*. The biggest international influencer marketing mess up was the failed Fyre Festival, a musical festival in the Bahamas that paid the likes of Kendall Jenner and Bella Hadid to drum up excitement and share social posts of a glamorous musical island adventure. When ticket purchasers arrived, they were met with something similar to *Survivor* and immediately hit back at the social stars for their endorsements and misleading them.

In South Africa, we've seen similar small-scale disasters. The influencer campaign around Takealot's Black Friday deals had some lash back when the popular retailer's site crashed and the influencers on the campaign (who had promoted deals for a week leading up to Black Friday) were immediately messaged on social media from their fans demanding answers. Answers the influencers couldn't give.

Cougar Gaming, a local gaming peripherals brand, had their own controversy after giving product to a prominent YouTuber to giveaway on his channel. Said YouTuber went on to announce he was sponsored by Cougar, who then had to come forward and denounce this after the gamer was caught allegedly making rape threats. Cougar comments that they had no professional agreements with the YouTuber when the incident occurred, beyond having given him some gear prior to the incident.

So, should we cut out influencer marketing from the budget?

Well, no. Influencer marketing still works, but we're going to see a giant shift in 2018. Here's the trends to expect locally:

Long-term relationships over campaigns

This shift in thinking already took shape in 2017 with smart brands, but we'll see a bigger shift in 2018. One-off campaigns no longer work. Watching influencer X post Instagram stories about a new car and how much he or she loves it, when it is public knowledge that they drive a Mini (because we saw it just last week in another Instastory) isn't going to cut it any more.

The audience wants consistency and is seeing through the BS that agencies are throwing at them. The influencers are

getting fed up, too. For many, who've now made content creation their full-time job, asking them for one tweet about a particular airline isn't going to cut it. For influencers with real and engaged audiences, once that endorsement has gone out, they're cutting themselves off from other airline work in future.

Thus they're no longer interested in being paid per tweet, but rather looking for long-term campaigns that allow for regular and consistent income, but also the opportunity to build a much more honest message for their communities.

The time of the 'middle men' is coming to an end. Good influencers are going to want to sit in the room with brands to discuss key messaging and long-term campaigns. Good content creators understand the need for original engaging content and have realised being one of many tweeting or posting the same thing doesn't work anymore. Good agencies are realising the same. 2018 will see far more long-term partnerships and a decline in the pay-per-post model many influencer marketing agencies promote.

The numbers do matter

Moving in to 2018, South Africa will begin to see that the numbers matter, but not the way you'd think. For far too long, we've looked at the wrong figures. Moving in to 2018 more agencies will wisen up and start easily identifying fake followers, follow-back clubs and general discrepancies in the numbers.



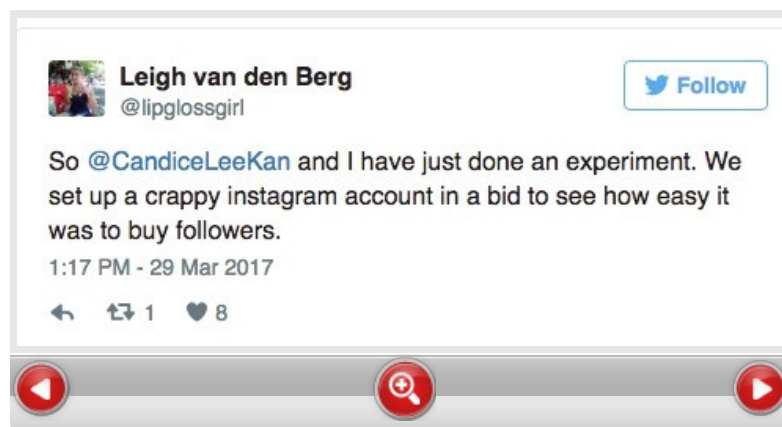
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As yet, there is no tool in the world that can monitor fake followings across social accounts. Almost all of the checks need to be done manually.

Agencies will begin to allocate dedicated resources to running Twitter audits and manually confirming that followers are real and that the follower-to-following ratio makes sense (someone with 10,000 followers following 15,000 accounts is likely not as influential as you might think).



Manual checks for Instagram bots will occur and agencies will start noting YouTube views over subscriber counts and engagement figures over followers. The "micro influencer" trend will fall away. While still a buzz topic internationally, the truth is in South Africa, many of the biggest influencers wouldn't be considered micro influencers internationally.

The term micro-influencer refers to someone with between 5,000 and 20,000 followers, according to [WWD](#). South African influencer campaigns attempting to promote accounts with 1,000 followers as micro-influencers to their clients will likely no longer see the budget – which would be better spent on paid media. Our influencer strategies need to be adapted for the local market. South Africa is in no place to tout micro-influencers, yet.

Pay to play

Whether we like it or not, good influencers will need to be paid. While it may be argued that authentic commentary is not guaranteed when money changes hands, the truth is – a good influencer spends time crafting strong creative content. The same content that costs ad agencies thousands of rands to produce. The idea that this content and time should be invested for free or for “love of a brand” is ludicrous. But also, it is time to start paying for something tangible.

A tweet here or Facebook post there is not enough. Pay actual content creators who can produce video and images that not only resonate with their audience, but also with yours. [L2's 2017 report](#) found that while 70% of brands work with influencers, 90% of brands fail to feature influencer content on their own accounts. 2018 will see a change, with more influencers focusing on brand account content and thus “earning” their pay check.

The rise of the niche

2018 will see a marked change in how influencers work with brands. The idea that a beauty product must be endorsed by a beauty blogger or that a fitness gadget should only be endorsed by a fitness influencer will change.

We'll see brands breaking out of the traditional moulds and looking at using influencers to create new audiences and communities. The biggest to benefit from this will be gaming. YouTube Gaming and Twitch, a gaming streaming platform, remain the biggest social channels reaching the largest and most engaged audiences. FMCG brands will likely begin to tap into this market in a big way moving in to 2018.

Local agencies have already been rumoured to have hired full-time Twitch streamers to run corporate channels, likely in a bid to find cheaper paths to Twitch advertising, which still remains considerably high in South Africa. The focus will shift towards this specific niche, which will require a large dose of growth as it remains, as yet, rather under developed.

2018 will see a maturity to South African influencer marketing. We're going to see it be less of a throw-away spend and more of a focused strategy, which forms part of the entire digital marketing mix – something that has been sorely missing up until now.

ABOUT SAMANTHA WRIGHT

Sam Wright is a full-time content creator at [techgirl.co.za](#) - she is a gaming and technology blogger and YouTuber, as well as an Esports MC and broadcaster who went on to host some of South Africa's first million-rand competitions before heading overseas, where she has hosted at Gamescom (Europe's biggest gaming expo) and in China (for a \$850,000 tournament). She currently consults to brands on how to reach a switched-on generation...

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