



# Book Review

Journalism & Mass Communication Educator  
2021, Vol. 76(3) 358–360  
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*The Influencer Code: How to Unlock the Power of Influencer Marketing*. Hobart, NY: Hatherleigh Press, 2020, 384 pp. \$25.00. ISBN: 9781578268245

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Smartly organized (and priced to be integrated into your college classroom), *The Influencer Code* by Amanda Russell shines a light on an area of the communications industry usually relegated to a single chapter, covering a great deal of ground in a single volume.

Segmented into five clusters or themes with three steps to success in its 16 chapters, this book is an ideal amount of content to incorporate one chapter per week for your whole semester and still have a primary text for your media relations, digital marketing, advertising, or public relations classroom. *The Influencer Code* covers the background and basics of an evolving profession, misconceptions about influence, types of influencers, and then takes a deeper dive into that which Russell refers to as “the influencer code”; a buzzy three-step storytelling approach. She also offers a deep dive into the process of cultivating influencers for any brand (straight from the influencer’s mouth). Russell attempts to coach the reader “how to ask the right questions and question the answers—especially when no one else is.” I think she has succeeded in that quest.

*The Influencer Code* is a refreshing and pleasant reminder that influencer marketing is not all gel nails and diet drink multilevel marketing (MLM) schemes, fads, and outrageous stunts (a la *Influencers in the Wild* Instagram). Russell sets to work in the first pages of the book outlining the nature of true influence as a facilitation of relationships and “one critical and hard-to-foster element: trust” (p. 14) and how influencer marketing allows a company or industry “to benefit from trust someone else has cultivated” (p. 15).

The author demands in chapter 4 that readers set SMART objectives, beware of

shiny objects that could derail focus on goals, and seek out the best relationship to cultivate for your brand or organization (pp. 61–76). Only then one develops a sound strategy focused on the business goals of the company, not of popularity or virality. I kept an eagle eye on this chapter as she moved from goals to objectives, strategy to evaluation to be sure she maintained the structure of sound measurement and then

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articulation of outcomes and not just the “shiny object” outputs that have been highlighted in many other business social media texts I have evaluated over the years. She does not disappoint.

Russell treats the subject with respect for the creativity it requires, yet pragmatically for today’s demanding key performance indicator (KPI)-driven business environments (when even your boss sometimes does not understand KPIs). Don’t worry, Russell has that handled too, specifically in the way she discusses an idea she doesn’t specifically name but describes thoroughly, which is “managing up” in the context of a business relationship where one might be the subordinate in the relationship at work but is actually the overwhelming expert in the actual work (pp. 77–95; 103–137).

The chapter I was particularly interested in before my book arrived was “measuring an influencer’s influence” chapter 8 which checks the tough love of Gary Vaynerchuk’s “the grind” with the sage reliable wisdom of Brian Solis’ “Pillars of Influence.” The result is a winning framework to gauge and measure audience influence as a metric that can lead to improved strategy for brands mixing both online and offline (p. 145) measures for the success of integrated communication techniques. This chapter takes you step-by-step (like you are talking to your Boomer boss) through creating and then also selling upstream the strategy AND the influencers involved. The author also includes some commonsense gut checks that would only come as a result of an experienced professional like the “red flag” check (p. 155), which is a quick assessment across all platforms once you have found your influencer match to make sure that nothing is lurking in the shadows that might come out later to embarrass the brand you are working on or with (something easy to overlook in the long list responsibilities of vetting the hordes of influencer-types). This helps avoid any unpleasant surprises down the road for brands once your brand and the influencer are joined together in marketing matrimony, including the elusive “fake influencer” category of really terrible people online.

As a person who has wrangled her fair share of user-generated content (UGC) for brands in my past life, chapter 9 (part of Step 2 of the influencer code) and chapter 14 (part of Step 3 of the influencer code) of Russell’s book bring wholesome organic content back into the spotlight (among the greatest assets a brand can wish for). She aptly reminds us that unique, authentic, gorgeous content is being created by users of their brands without so much a discount code dangled in front of them. Actual fans of your brand that you can engage to provide deeper coverage of your brand through future deliberate relationships with a little coaching on the merits of cultivating high value UGC (p. 197), defining the relationship to foster an actual binding agreement (p. 262) and finally, in chapter 14, facilitating content that keeps working for your brand by connecting on a more personal level with your influencer through to your audience (p. 316). Russell describes the bliss of articulating purpose beyond strategy;

someone finally admitting that it wasn't divine intervention or actual magic (p. 320) that created the series of events, but rather a sound series of business decisions strung together skillfully for a favorable outcome (throw that marketing "expert's" template into the garbage and do the real work already).

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Amanda Russell's book, *The Influencer Code—How to Unlock the Power of Influencer Marketing* specifically demonstrates that while the medium has evolved, foundational elements of marketing have not: relationships and trust. I encourage my public relations colleagues to look beyond the word "marketing" in the subtitle, as PR is well represented in this text.

The author packages the subject up in a classroom friendly, easy to follow three step process. With heavy emphasis from beginning to end on ditching bogus templates to focus on trust and relationships for each brand, baked into Russell's code: (a) define the RIGHT goal; (2) observe and identify the RIGHT influencers; (3) create the RIGHT connection, connecting to people on a personal, individual level (p. 383). She maintains a framework that can envelop any communications-based curriculum with ease.

I recommend pairing this book with a social media strategy book like Quesenberry's *Social Media Strategy*, Luttrell's *Social Media How to Engage, Share, and Connect*, or Freberg's *Social Media for Strategic Communication* for a "how to guide" to partner with their influencer and content chapters. For me, this book fills a hole for digital natives, by giving students (and practitioners) the specific "how" you use influencers in a business context, which will overwrite all the pretext of consuming influencer content to evolve from consumer to strategist.

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