between those influencers, that is a vulnerability for you as a brand. Also, for those who are maybe experimenting with it, don't quit early, don't give up. Maybe something doesn't go exactly as planned. You thought your content would come out beautifully and it didn't. Learn from it, just like any marketing tactic. Don't throw in the towel too early.

Don't forget about measurement. You have a big idea, you want to execute it. You think this influencer is going to create mass awareness and you're going to have lines out the door. Not necessarily. Why are we doing this? Who is the audience? What do we hope it will achieve? How will we know we were successful?

Finally, don't try to hold on too tightly to your campaigns. Do be willing to give the influencer room to be creative and play. If you have a really tight contract that's very restrictive — which you need to have a really solid contract — don't let it be so restrictive that the influencer's hands are tied. You're going to end up with inauthentic, unrelatable content that you just paid primo dollars for, right?

What should the influencer selection process look

Micro-influencers are those who have followings from around 10,000 to 100,000 people. Anything below that would be considered a nano-influencer. And then over 100,000, you have more of a macro influencer. And then beyond that, like a million and up, you have more of a mega celebrity sort of influencer.

How you select the influencers for your campaign depends on your priorities, but we tend to look more at engagement rates, because you can have that macro celebrity partner and expect really great ROI and pay for really great ROI and not get it because the engagement is not there. We tend to see restaurant brands using micro-influencers. Often, we find micro-influencers have earned very high levels of audience trust, and that's due to their relatability. They're very protective of their audiences. And that's why you want more of that collaborative approach with that influencer where they have some creative freedom and there's willingness to experiment. Micro-influencers are much more cost-effective because their reaches are not as wide as those macro, celebrity types.

Now we're seeing people say it's the year of the micro influencer. Let's stop putting all of our dollars in one bucket on these macro relationships. We could expand and have so many more partners and so much more engagement and better ROI through these smaller ongoing relationships versus these one-off, cross-your-fingers, hopefully-it-works macro relationships.

Belle Communication is a women-owned creative strategy and PR agency. It helps brands think bigger for now and next with bold, insight-led campaigns that generate meaningful results. Through influencer marketing and earned media, the firm connects the dots to build brand moments that matter. It has worked with 100-plus brands, including Shake Shack, First Watch, The Halal Guys, Nestlé, and Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams. Belle is based in Columbus, Ohio.



DAN BEJMUK

Cofounder & CEO, Dreambox

What is the right way to leverage an influencer to support a restaurant brand today, in your opinion?

It is genuinely one of the most cringe-worthy dynamics that we see, and we see it a lot, where you'll have a brand that wants to partner with an influencer and wants to tell the influencer how to create content. Let's pump the brakes a little bit here. The reason why we're recommending this influencer is not to tell them how to communicate to their audience. They've done that. They've developed a following. Our job is to make sure that we can provide the pairing between the brand and the influencer and the influencer's audience in a way that is authentic.

What TikTok has really done so far is really challenge people to be authentic. You think about Instagram and how polished so much of Instagram content is, that's kind of the name of the game: polishing and presenting an image that is so aspirational that people look and say, "I want that." You look at something like TikTok, where authenticity is so real and anything that isn't authentic, people just skip right past it. And that's the key from a collaboration standpoint. It's my plea to every marketer alive: When partnering with an influencer, we need to make sure that they understand what we do and why our brand is distinct and special and who our audience is and what matters to us and why we want to partner with them. Having that transparent conversation, I think, really helps put everyone on the same page.

What are some things you would suggest to restaurant brands for finding that right influencer? One of the ways that we find influencers is an influ-

encer comes to a brand and they are such fans already that they're putting their own content out before we've even spoken to them. We don't need to show them why this brand is special. We just want to give them a platform to be able to really amplify their message. That's one piece that's certainly extremely helpful: When there is talk of an influencer coming in, be extremely prepared, potentially have additional eyeballs on what may happen while they're in the store.

When you have people with an affinity for a brand, that's remarkable. As brand marketers, we're always trying to reinforce this notion of, "These are my people." Well, if we have someone who's already a fan of our brand, we're 10 steps ahead.

What kinds of resources should brands expect to commit to influencer marketing?

I don't think that we can talk about influence without Dreambox is based in Los Angeles. talking about the Keith Lee Effect. You look at Keith

Lee, a guy with 15 million followers on TikTok, he comes into small independent restaurants and he's an honest guy; if he loves the experience, he'll share it. If he doesn't love the experience, he'll let you know. There's a being-ready-for-what-could-happen perspective, from being buttoned up operationally, from being able to make the experience for everyone better. But then looking at, what happens if things don't go great? What are we going to do about it? Then you get into the reputation management, risk mitigation component.

A lot of this comes down to making sure that we've got our A team on staff that day, making sure that from a food prep standpoint, that this is something that's being made to spec, that we have items that are being turned around quickly enough that the influencer isn't waiting. If there's any reason for them to complain, they're going to, and that's the risk that we take. And so being able to tee them up so that they can have something that they walk away and they feel as though we've really rolled out the red carpet for them — those are elements that we really see being successful.

How might influencer marketing help restaurants turn their traffic around?

You look at different elements in a restaurant's life cycle where you have manufactured guest traffic. The grand opening is a great example: You've got a few months after opening where you see how you're performing, and then reality starts to sink in and it could mean a whole bunch of soul searching around what you did during the grand opening that made it so big. A lot of that was the grand opening itself — the fact that you have something that's new, that people can come and try it.

One of the absolute components that we see as so fundamental to this is when those moments happen — and they may be manufactured like a grand opening, they may be something that's influencer driven — is seeing how these can remain sustainable. How are we going to retain these guests? Are we going to continue to invite them back in? What are we doing from a profitability standpoint to make sure that when they come in, they are making us money?

Dreambox is a digital advertising agency that has worked to grow over 150 different multi-unit restaurant concepts over the past 25 years. It has supported brands from Yum!, Darden, Landry's, FAT Brands and Delaware North to emerging concepts such as Velvet Taco, Grimaldi's Pizzeria, and JINYA Ramen Bar. Dreambox is based in Los Angeles.

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