

Case study

How social media influencers enabled a B2B company to drive awareness and engagement with their target consumers

Received: 5th July, 2018



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Abstract

In the autumn of 2016, TE Connectivity (TE), a global engineering business to business (B2B) leader in connectivity and sensor solutions, launched its first social media influencer campaign to increase brand awareness, change perceptions and grow the contact database. The influencer campaign was launched in conjunction with its sponsorship of the Andretti Formula E team, and was paired with an incentive — a sweepstake to win a trip to Andretti Autosport to see the engineering behind motorsports and an exclusive lunch with Michael Andretti, team owner and former champion race car driver. YouTuber Jason Fenske, creator of the channel Engineering Explained, flew to the United Kingdom to learn and film three videos about TE's involvement in Formula E, the first all-electric international street car race series, and its parallels to the increasing consumer electric vehicle trend. With over 100 TE products in a Formula E car and a major player in the automotive industry, the racetrack-to-the-road thematic videos were conceived and produced to attract engineers from diverse industries and across the business spectrum. The success of Engineering Explained led to influencer programmes with TE's sponsorship of rLoop, a crowdsourced team of engineers participating in Elon Musk's SpaceX Hyperloop Competition. Leading up to and during the first competition, TE produced a five-part documentary chronicling the formation of the team, the technology and the excitement of the challenge to create the fifth mode of transport, which was amplified to an engineering audience through a multi-influencer distribution

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strategy. During the second competition, a YouTube influencer, Linus Tech Tips, travelled to California to film a 20-minute Facebook Live segment the night before the competition to capture the tension, nerves and excitement as the rLoop team put the finishing touches on their prototype, and produced a post-competition YouTube video on the technology of the Hyperloop. This paper comprises a practitioner's insights into and lessons learned from activating B2B influencer programmes.

Keywords

social media, influencers, video, YouTube, B2B, engagement, Twitter

DISPELLING THE MYTH

When people think about influencers, fashion, food, sports and entertainment in the business to consumer (B2C) space are usually first to come to mind. While these areas may be part of pop culture, influencers can be seen in any topic, trend or theme — having the power to impact decisions because of their authority, knowledge or position. Influencers can range from celebrities to industry experts/thought leaders to everyday bloggers and content creators on social media.¹ Contrary to popular belief, business to business (B2B) customers are not solely influenced by price. Twenty-two per cent of B2B customers are persuaded by industry experts, and 72 per cent of people look for recommendations and relevant content from industry peers in B2B segments.²

OUTLINING THE OBJECTIVES

With TE Connectivity's (TE) target audience of engineers, it had the stories to tell, but needed a trusted source to expand our reach, provide credibility and increase engagement. The primary objectives of the campaign were clearly identified: to shape the partnership focus and investment, and ensure that TE delivered on its desired outcomes. It was critical that the objectives were integrated with the existing brand marketing strategy to ensure that the campaign had the potential to positively contribute in the long term and was

not just a stand-alone solution. A financial investment of less than US\$100,000 was committed to the programme to accomplish the objectives. For TE, the main marketing objective was having TE as the first choice for engineers, accomplished by the following:

- Increasing awareness of the TE brand to attract new customers
- Changing perceptions from a traditional electrical components manufacturer to a total technology solutions provider
- Growing database by converting unknown to known visitors on TE.com (lead generation)

MINING FOR INFLUENCERS

While the concept of launching a social media influencer campaign may be attractive, the thought of finding the right influencer for a brand voice is likely to be intimidating. Technology — specifically brand and social listening tools such as Sprout Social, Sysomos, Brand Watch and Hootsuite, to name a few — with search and categorical functionalities offers relatively easy mechanisms to find relevant influencers in an industry. Most listening tools allow clients to scrape social media platforms, earned media and blogs based on criteria such as followers or community size, geography and keywords. Filtering by brand mentions or trends may also expose influencers who are

already engaging with a company's content, following competitors' accounts or participating in relevant industry conversations.

Becoming resourceful

If listening tools are not available, one can manually search for influencers to build a list of prospects. Consider searching relevant hashtags across social platforms to find influencers talking about a specific topic, and search engagements and comments on industry blogs and communities. Once a few have been identified, examine their feed and the people they follow to see who they collaborate and engage with — they are likely to be inspired by people who produce similar content.

Looking beyond follower counts

Another common concern is that people are looking for influencers on the level of major celebrities. Remember the target market and that there is no need to engage with the world — only with those who are important to the specific company. Especially since B2B companies are often involved in higher-revenue deals, there is no need to be as pressured to hit high follower numbers as would be the case if selling deodorant or chocolate bars. It is advised not to get tunnel vision on followers, which influencers can technically 'buy', but instead, dig deep to see the engagement on the posts. Likes, retweets/shares and comments are all leading indicators of the power of the influencer. The attraction to Engineering Explained was not only the 'thumbs up' rating on YouTube, but also the quality of comments. Valuable engineering-specific questions and insights were also found in the videos. Based on these comments, and by clicking on a few profiles of his social media followers, it was clear that his channel audiences aligned

with TE's target market. Engineering Explained also responded to many of the questions left in the comments section, which proved that he had a strong relationship with his followers and was willing to go beyond only producing linear content. When TE started to talk directly with Engineering Explained, they went even deeper to get his metrics as well as to understand his video through rate (VTR), which reveals the percentage of the video that was watched from start to finish (it exceeded that for TE's own YouTube channel videos).

Making the connection

Once there is a list, one can begin to direct message each account personally. It is important to remember that an influencer partnership is a value exchange. They are likely already working with brands or have other offers, so the conversation should be initiated with the brand's unique value in mind. For Engineering Explained, the partnership with TE offered exclusive access to the Andretti Formula E race team and garage, and the opportunity to share the story of clean-energy mobility and innovation through the Formula E lens with his audience.

Treating influencers as partners

The foundation of influencer relationships is to treat them as true partners — with respect for them and their audience. TE spent time developing the relationship — educating them on the company and its objectives, and putting them in touch with subject matter experts to learn about TE technology and their respective applications — and also spent time learning about their audience, the type of content that would perform well, and how to best tailor it to the influencers' audience. Engineering

Explained did a great job of challenging when necessary, often informing TE that his audience would not respond favourably to certain circumstances or phrases. Influencers must be asked to be honest partners and not to just say ‘yes’ to brands because they are being paid. That mentality becomes a disservice to all involved, including the audience. Another suggestion is to develop a content review protocol. Reviewing the outline or script at the beginning minimises extensive post-production edits and ensures that the content’s focus is meeting expectations and objectives.

GETTING MANAGEMENT BUY-IN

In large corporations, relinquishing control and putting a brand in the hands of an influencer is usually outside the comfort zone. To obtain support from leadership, the following strategic areas were addressed:

Lead with objectives

The first mistake is that people get so excited about the influencer that they introduce him/her first in a presentation. Remember leadership’s focus — finding strategic and cost-efficient ways to achieve brand and business objectives. With an understanding of these priorities and TE’s wider marketing objectives, the influencer campaign was framed as a means to add real value to the brand.

Leverage data to demonstrate the opportunity of influencer partnerships

A clear shift is taking place from linear television to digital and social media platforms. Cord cutting is accelerating at an unprecedented pace — the number of cord cutters aged 18 and older increased by 33.2 per cent from 2016 to 2017.³ The number of hours people spend watching

videos (watch time) on YouTube increased by 60 per cent in the same period, the fastest growth in two years.⁴

A social media influencer combined with an audience-rich platform enables production and distribution efficiencies, as 94 per cent of pre-roll ads are skipped⁵ and 50 per cent of videos published by the top 100 global brands get fewer than 1,000 views.⁶ While TE is a multi-billion dollar company, producing these videos on its own YouTube channel (ie same content, but no influencer partnership) would not have amounted to the same success metrics and would have been more costly when factoring in production crews on top of a paid distribution strategy.

Introduce the influencer to leadership

Beyond sharing metrics from its influencer, TE wanted its leadership to feel that they knew its influencer. TE showcased a few videos, illustrated how he represented and authentically integrated other brands, and shared some audience feedback and comments. TE also established and shared its content review protocol to ensure that the brand reputation was at minimal risk.

CAMPAIGN INTEGRATION AND ACTIVATION

A crucial element in the success of an influencer campaign is thoughtful campaign integration to amplify existing assets. The Engineering Explained partnership presented an opportunity to integrate the brand campaign and the company’s first sweepstakes promotion.

Today’s impossible is tomorrow’s awesome

The brand campaign — ‘Today’s Impossible Is Tomorrow’s Awesome’ — is designed to

champion engineers who believe ‘impossible’ is just the starting point for tomorrow’s breakthrough, and showcase how TE’s connectivity and sensor solutions are making tomorrow awesome. As Formula E is ‘Tomorrow’s Awesome’, TE worked with Andretti to launch the first sweepstake — ‘Tomorrow’s Awesome Experience with Andretti Technologies’. The sweepstake was designed to send two lucky winners and their colleagues to Andretti Autosport in Indianapolis, Indiana, for a private tour of the race shop with top engineers for a detailed look at the engineering behind IndyCar, Global Rally Cross and Formula E series, plus lunch with legendary race car champion and team owner Michael Andretti.

Building the ecosystem

The sweepstake was promoted by racing and business unit hubs on TE.com, social media, publications, display and Engineering Explained. Through the Engineering Explained YouTube videos and social media, TE had the opportunity to drive a tailored audience of engineers to the TE.com sweepstake experience to grow its database, converting unknown visitors to known contacts. After visitors converted, they received a confirmation that encouraged them to continue discovery of the digital ‘Awesome’ content on TE.com.

THE CHALLENGES OF LIVE CONTENT

For the second SpaceX Hyperloop Competition, Linus Tech Tips did a Facebook Live to capture the excitement of rLoop’s engineers’ final preparations. Unfortunately, TE did not have a representative on-site, and the Facebook Live captured the engineers partying instead of what TE had intended it to be — an intense time putting the final touches on the prototype. In some ways, it was nice to show the

human element of celebration for developing a remarkable piece of technology; however, the display of alcohol and other potentially disrespectful items in the video’s background put the brand reputation at risk.

IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNED

Manage live content with an on-site presence

While the social media influencer, Linus, was fulfilling his contractual obligations by doing a live stream, TE made the mistake of not having an on-site presence to ensure that the content was appropriate and safe for the brand. TE has since made the decision to have a company representative accompany influencers to ensure that the live content meets the company’s expectations and aligns with its brand values. TE is also mindful to have prepared statements and a communication protocol in the event that an influencer’s content does not accurately portray the brand or the company’s intentions.

Develop a comprehensive programme

A comprehensive marketing programme goes beyond creating awareness and engagement; it also includes a robust nurturing programme specific to leads or contacts captured as a result of the campaign. The leads collected from the sweepstake went straight to TE’s business unit’s nurturing programme, which is heavily product focused. As a result, many leads did not convert into sales opportunities, as these relationships were not fostered with tailored content based on their entry and touchpoints.

Amplify influencers’ content

Engineering Explained’s content was shared on TE’s social media channels; however, there was a bigger opportunity

to extend the reach and drive more sweepstake leads by leveraging the content through partner and paid media. According to a 2017 study by eMarketer, 74 per cent repurpose influencer content on their own social media channels, 46 per cent on their own and operated sites, 36 per cent for paid ads on social media, 20 per cent for ads on other digital media sites and 14 per cent for programmatic advertising ads.⁷

DELIVERING OUTCOMES

The thoughtful objective identification, disciplined leadership education and integrated campaign execution resulted in significant returns for the brand and business. On YouTube alone, the Engineering Explained videos had 660,000 views — totalling 616 days of watch time and an average ‘thumbs up’ rating of 98 per cent. The sweepstake saw the majority of traffic and entries come from Engineering Explained’s promotion, helping to contribute to 20 per cent landing page to entrant conversion rate, five times TE’s benchmark.

The multi-influencer distribution strategy for the five-part documentary series on rLoop resulted in over 550 tweets to amplify reach (garnering over 11 million potential impressions). Linus Tech Tips’ Facebook Live segment the night before the Hyperloop Competition garnered 47,000 live views, and the post-competition YouTube video on the technology of the Hyperloop, including TE product integrations, returned 735,181 views with a watch time over 3.5 million minutes.

THE FUTURE OF INFLUENCERS

With an increasing movement from television commercials and banner ads

to content that enhances experiences, increases knowledge and drives engagement and connection, the influencer market will continue to grow. More demand will lead to more supply, causing a clearer divide between influencers who exploit their audiences and those who engage their audiences with partnership-driven branded content. Governmental agencies, such as the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, will increasingly monitor how brands and influencers partner and the legal stipulations instituted. The social media platforms themselves will most likely play an increasing role and institute ways for them to better monetise.

It must be remembered that influencers are not a new concept — Michael Jordan has technically been an influencer with Nike for many years. The platforms, which have opened up the gates for people to become influencers, have expanded. As digital transformation continues, look for influencers to leverage new communication platforms such as virtual and augmented reality, and for brands to attach themselves to those individuals and groups who capture attention and create engaging content.

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