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INTELLIGENCE

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SERVICE AREA:

Business Development Strategies

ANALYSIS

BECOMING AN INDUSTRY INFLUENCER

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contents

Document

Introduction	2
The Need to Influence	2
The Master Plan	3
A Public Persona	4
Conclusion	5

Figures

Figure 1: Marketing Priorities in 2020	3
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Introduction

In popular culture, the term “influencer” is often associated with social media users and celebrities with large followings that cultivate an audience matching the target demographic. Influencers possess specific knowledge, are considered to be in-the know, and often serve as someone their audience looks to for advice. Although social media users and celebrities are not the focus of this article, print service providers (PSPs) may have much to gain by borrowing from the practices of these influencers.

In today's digital age, the internet offers a wealth of content, knowledge, and information to customers and prospects. A never-ending stream of topics, opinions, and research can easily be found through a simple search. This endless and constantly updating stream of information and marketing means that standing out from the crowd is arguably more of a challenge now than it has ever been before. On top of this, COVID-19 has shifted much of today's engagement away from in-person interactions to online interactions. Although it may be only temporary, this shift has elevated the role of industry influencers. Today's business climate is especially challenging and uncertain, and influencers have become a key component for customer engagement and loyalty.

With careful planning, savvy PSPs have an opportunity to be viewed as knowledgeable, credible, and accessible authorities in the industry. A strong digital presence can help drive revenues while also cutting through the imposed isolation of the COVID pandemic.

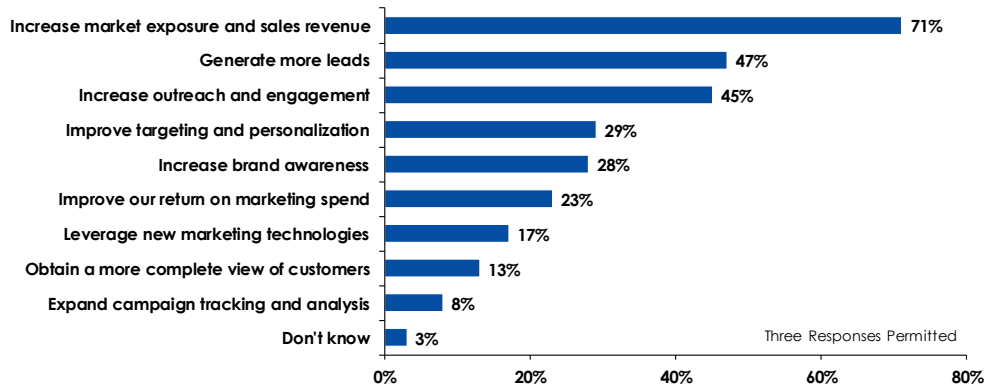
The Need to Influence

It is a simple truth that consumers can only buy products and services they are aware of. This means that, regardless of superior quality, prices, or service – many PSPs can miss sales if they remain invisible to their target base of clients. In the 2020 Marketing and Sales Best Practices study, participants were asked to list the top three priorities to marketing their business this year. Overwhelmingly, “increasing market exposure and sales revenue” stood out as the imperative, followed by “generating more leads” and “increasing outreach and engagement.”



Figure 1: Marketing Priorities in 2020

Which of the following represent your top priorities for marketing your business this year?



Source: *Marketing and Sales Best Practices*; KL Kimerer Research 2020

None of these needs are new – it is the landscape they exist within that is changing. The PSP space is rich with competition, and now the communication channels, expanding before the onslaught of a pandemic, have turned almost exclusively digital. In addition to this, the financial realities of an unexpected recession have forced many businesses into survival mode, where innovation once planned over a multi-year period must materialize in months to keep competitive.

Without a strong online influence, it is very possible to become lost in the back pages of search engines like Google, where it is unlikely that new clients will bother looking. Given how thin some organization's profit margins have become, a slide such as this could prove fatal.

The Master Plan

The first step in every initiative requires a strategy. In this case creating a presence as an industry influencer requires a keen understanding of who the audience is, what problems your products and services solve, and what advantages clients gain from choosing your business over the competition.

Knowing an audience is likely the most important element of being an influencer. The narrative, interaction, and words of wisdom depend on who is being spoken to. Start with a customer persona. Modelling a strategy after the ideal customer will offer important decisions on how to structure the sales narrative.

Within that persona includes data such as the roles of the intended audience. What are their titles, their objectives – how do they like to communicate? Once it is known where an intended audience for lack of a better phrase “hangs out,” then businesses can start developing specific strategies for engagement. Answering these questions paves the path to ensure prospects and customers recognize your organization's products and services. A



clear vision of what the best customers look like and how they behave saves time and resources while consequently demonstrating respect to buyers in need of the particular product and services.

A Public Persona

People need to know a print service provider's name, what the PSP stands for, the problems it solves, and the value it delivers. Unfortunately, many PSPs are known only for delivering print. While such a service is valuable, it lacks personality – especially in an overcrowded market with hundreds of options to choose from. Having a public persona can help PSPs develop this uniqueness. Methods to convey a public persona and how it differentiates from the competition include telling stories that highlight the problems that your products have solved in the past. Success happens when an organization has useful knowledge and understands how to impart said wisdom with the right audience.

An influencer must display authenticity and passion for the industry by leveraging their knowledge and experience while interacting directly with their audience. The more accessible an organization is, the better likelihood this marketing initiative will succeed. There are several methods to cultivate a durable public persona. A few ideas include:

- ◆ **Create a library of teaching resources.** These resources can be circulated across multiple platforms, such as social media posts, website articles, e-books, e-mail, and newsletters.
- ◆ **Network, but not just for professional gain.** Be a connector. Introducing people that can benefit from a mutual relationship will earn trust and credibility, creating an image of impartiality and fairness.
- ◆ **Consider product and process demonstrations to give customers compelling insight.** It might help them further appreciate the capabilities provided and introduce new ones that were not previously considered.

Even during a pandemic, all three of these initiatives can be developed and carried through to fruition, provided the PSP in question has an established online presence and knows how to use its influencer status to reach out to the right platforms that will connect it with its audience.

Yet while the previously mentioned methods can be invaluable, they are often one-way conversations. To open dialogue, there are various methods that have increased in popularity with online solutions. Examples include:

- ◆ Hosting a panel of experts via webcast, with Q&A segments from the participants.
- ◆ Podcasts, which can be either hosted onsite or through other partners. PSPs should always welcome the opportunity to appear on other relevant podcasts or online audio presentations whenever possible.



- ◆ Advertise an availability to speak at events where the target audience and fellow influencers may assemble.

Above all, be generous in thought. This is not a case of baiting in new clients with a figurative carrot on the end of a string, always dangling just out of reach. Give some (not all) of the actionable information. This demonstrates up front a sense of openness and confidence, especially during the extraneous research buyers complete prior to engaging your services.

It is important to acknowledge influence does not happen overnight. Building an influencer profile takes consistent and focused effort with innovative ideas. A leadership or influencer role in its best definition is not an appointed position, but one earned through the demonstration of specialized knowledge, skills, adaptability, creativity, and practicality.

Opinion

Becoming a thought leader is not for everyone. It takes a clear vision and dedication, with the abilities to communicate efficiently and connect bridges. Customers are not looking for more information—they already have more of that than they know what to do with! Instead, they are seeking guidance so they can make sense of it all. The end goal is to build authentic connections with an ideal audience, as well as with other experts in the field.

The COVID pandemic has put new levels of pressure on PSPs to exemplify their work and stand out in a crowded industry. It is no longer enough to simply print and print well. When we finally emerge from this pandemic, the leaders will have an established online presence—one that positions them as an influencer by subtly communicating the need for their products and services to a wide range of existing and prospective clients that are eager to be engaged.



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As Director of Keypoint Intelligence's Business Development Strategies Consulting Service, Karen Kimerer has experienced the many challenges of expanding current market opportunities and securing new business. She has developed a systematic approach to these opportunities, addressing the unique requirements of becoming a leader in our changing industry.

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