

The science of disproportionate influence

or why chasing clicks is distracting you from the important business of building a community

You've got a million followers on Twitter, your latest YouTube video just got half a million hits and your Facebook likes are circumnavigating the planet.

Are you bothered that half your impressions are unwanted pop-ups, that you bought thousands of Instagram followers for less than £2 per 100 and that many of them are fake accounts? Are you heck.

But maybe you should be. Depth of engagement – the notion that who follows you matters more than how many follow you – has become an old-fashioned concept in an arms race to be the biggest and most retweeted. In fact, engagement is the bedrock of quality, long-term relationships with almost any sort of audience – and it makes money. Depth with the right people, living deep in their communities, however small, equals trust. And trust equals attention. And attention equals engagement and response. And engaged communities can always be monetised.

We might call this the **'power of disproportionate influence'** – the eminently proveable idea that smaller (but still sizeable) numbers of people who trust and engage with you deliver far more, for far longer, than a larger, fleeting audience attracted by the bright lights of clickbait or its unloved cousin, churnalism.



Marketing has become increasingly in thrall to big data, while those of us who create content for a living continue to see **the value of communities**. Where marketing seeks to influence the actions and behaviours of an individual, media owners and other content marketers seek to influence the actions and behaviours of whole communities of interest.

Most often, this influence is prosaic and unremarked. So, for example, Clare loves small dogs. She lives near Birmingham, works in a florist and has three school-aged children, a husband, a mortgage, a Fiat 500 and Trudy, her bichon frise. Charles is a trainee accountant, lives alone in a single-bed flat, plays a bit of football, tinkles the ivories in a band on weekends and walks the Downs with his beloved lakeland terrier, Oscar.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES



HR professionals are 'people people' by their nature. But the depth of their feeling for *People Management* – the official media brand of the CIPD, produced by Haymarket Network – goes beyond creating their own front covers (above). In recent years, the proportion of readers taking action as a result of reading a *People Management* article has risen to 76 per cent, making this a powerful (and highly active) community.

As a marketer dealing in personas, there is no earthly reason for me to target Clare and Charles with the same message. Their needs, genders, aspirations and life stages are entirely different. But as a **content marketer, I understand something very special** about these two people: they share a passion for small dogs.



So I create a community devoted to the love of small dogs. I choose to edit and curate the content using people who love small dogs. I create a brand, 'Small Dog World', and my experts begin a conversation. They share expert hints and tips, they tell funny stories, they post pictures and videos and, before long, other people have started joining in because they have found a **voice that resonates authentically with their own**. After a period of time, maybe a year or more, the quality of engagement in Small Dog World becomes a commercial proposition. The community is influential and, because of the trust it engenders, if it was to promote a product or service I am trying to sell, it would very likely deliver some worthwhile revenue and advocacy.

This is the successful history of most publishing and, latterly, content marketing, no matter what the channel. The successful media owner builds a community of people who share a passion or maybe work in the same business. It lives deep in its community, becomes its expert, informed, positive, articulate and friendly voice and then

translates this into a commercial proposition and monetises the community without ever compromising its values.

The numbers are rarely huge, but they don't need to be because **the value is in the quality of the people and the engagement**. And the influence these people wield is disproportionate.

We can alight on any number of real life success stories to illuminate this point. In 2007, for example, the Fair Trade for British Farmers turned to magazines *Farmers Guardian* and *Country Living* to help raise awareness of pricing issues that were crippling the industry. Using the slogan 'No cows, No countryside' the two brands launched a campaign that raised 42,000 signatures, forced an early day motion in parliament, saw supermarkets improve price initiatives for farmers and paved the way for a supermarket ombudsman.

Fast forward to November 2012, when Colorado and Washington became the first US states to legalise regulated marijuana sales. Out of this momentous change was born MassRoots, a social network of pot smokers and cannabis business owners. Founded by Isaac Dietrich, appropriately while stoned, it was created for people like him who smoked dope regularly but wouldn't post on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter because of connections to family, friends, work colleagues and bosses. MassRoots went on to become the first cannabis-related company to go public, with its shares now traded on the Nasdaq stock exchange.

Yet in the commercial ecosystem, brands and media buyers still place extraordinary value not on communities wielding such disproportionate influence, but on the raw numbers of impressions, uniques and follower counts. Very often, the worst examples of bad branded content are those awkward halfway house stories, a neverland between overt advertising or marketing and publishing for a community of interest.

Social entrepreneur Gary Vaynerchuk expressed it well in the *Huffington Post* when he talked about the marketing world being **'blinded by the notion that more media impressions**

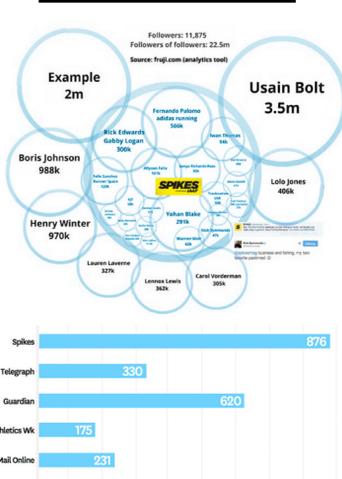
always correlates to a successful piece of content'. Once brands start to think about content-building communities, they automatically start asking the right questions.

For example: 'Am I building a loyal following?' or 'am I creating media value?' become more important than 'how many views did this content get?' or 'how many fans or followers have I got compared with my rivals?' If a brand produces content that does anything other than delight a reader or audience, it's likely to be costing it something, whether that's goodwill, trust or media spend.

Media businesses know that building these types of loyal relationships with communities takes time and commitment. They also know that people don't form relationships with individual pieces of content, they form relationships with the aggregators that expertly curate the conversation, serve the community and promise a **regular supply of stories that are tonally and emotionally tuned in to 'me'** and to fellow community members. Brands producing content should ask themselves: 'If I pulled stumps and stopped telling stories would anyone care or even notice?' The answer, most often, is 'no'.

If commercial organisations genuinely want to create value and wield the sort of disproportionate influence media businesses do, they should commit to making a proper content brand, not just branded content. If they're properly brave, they'll create a sub-brand and keep their distance from it, allow it to grow organically, allow it to talk about them and their competitors, welcome criticism or negative feedback, and not become obsessed with numbers or with personalised marketing. It might not generate as many likes, but it will certainly last longer.

SURPRISE MEDALLIST



The undeniable passion of athletics fans is at the heart of SPIKES, the multi-channel brand Haymarket Network has designed and maintained for IAAF. This small community has remarkable power, which was perfectly demonstrated when Wilson Kipsang broke the world marathon record: SPIKES recorded greater social media activity on the topic than any 'mainstream' media outlet. And last year, it drew in online visitors from 174 countries.

