

Turning the Tables on SM Viral Marketing: One Brand Influencer's Words to the Wise

A few weeks ago, I was asked by a company marketer - let's call the company High-End Department Store - to participate in their first attempt at viral marketing activity as a brand influencer for Sam Edelman, a popular shoe designer. To participate, all I had to do was write interesting blog posts about my experiences wearing a pair of Sam Edelman shoes. They provided the shoes and a list of "hot spots" for me to go wearing them. This assignment lasted 2 weeks and culminated in a private shoe party for those in my network, the networks of the other 3 influencers, and some of their "key" clients.

I volunteered not just because I love shoes and social media, but because I figured I'd learn a thing or two about the burgeoning world of influenced viral marketing. And boy did I learn some things. Here are the lessons I learned during my brief time as a product influencer about the do's and don'ts of running a viral marketing strategy.

1. Equip your influencers with an understanding of your goals and some tips for how they can help you achieve them.

While my contact at this High-End Department Store did a great job of getting me excited about my free pair of shoes, she didn't do too much when it came to making sure I understood her goals for this activity and what I could do to help her. Some key things she could have done to help my posts be as "influential" as possible were:

- Provide me with key words she would like me to use when posting (and how to demark them). This would have helped make sure a wide range of people saw my posts.
- Develop a list of questions she would like to see my posts address. This would have provided some focus to my posts (so that they didn't just sound like a marketer finding a new channel to bug people).
- Lastly, clarify the list of desired actions for someone who is reading my posts. For example, is she hoping to see folks click through to a specific area on the High-End Department Store website? Or go to the store more? Or, more specifically, attend the Sam Edelman shoe event? Knowing what measurements she was watching would have impacted which actions I encouraged.

2. Make sure your influencers have enough to say about your product and are prepared tweet about it multiple times a day.

Now, I love shoes and have a gift to gab... but even I ran out of steam after a few days. Having some daily suggestions from my contact could have helped me keep the tweets fresh and interesting. It would have also kept me a lot more engaged in the program. These suggestions could have come in the form of scenarios to work through with the shoes as well as topics I should cover. And for “filler” tweets, she might have provided links to some good third party reviews of the shoes or other interesting shoe-relevant websites.

It also would have been a good idea for my contact to provide some small amount of “best practice” guidance for me around things like frequency of tweeting, styles of tweets likely to get responses, etc. She might have even pointed me to a free twitter tracking site so I could monitor how I was doing throughout the program. She should have considered doing the same.

3. If you enlist your customers to blog for you, be prepared to be just as involved in this activity as they are... and be sure to live up to any commitments you make to them.

In my case, the High-End Department Store contact went dark once the recruitment process was complete. As a result, when challenges arose – such as shoes not arriving, “hot spots” not knowing who we were, and general confusion about what we were doing – we had no choice but to tweet and blog about it in hopes that maybe our contact was listening. (As I note in point 4 below, we later found out she was not.)

So –what would I have done differently?

- First, I would have been reaching out to my influencers periodically throughout the activity to just check in, make sure they had what they needed and were clear on expectations and assignment.
- Second, I would have held up my end of the bargain – if I promised it-girl status at the new “hot” club, I would have delivered it.
- Third, I would have always returned phone calls and emails from my influencers. *This was probably the biggest miss, because all other issues could have been addressed if this one small thing was handled correctly.*

4. Listen to what your influencers are saying (and show your support)... Letting them see your level of engagement will only raise up theirs.

This is, of course, a tough one. There is a fine line between supporting and influencing your influencers – one you don’t want to cross. That said, no one likes to hear crickets when they are putting themselves out there... especially if it is in front of those who know them in their non-influencer life. Find creative ways to reward good posts and address issues and

challenges they may be expressing in their posts.

I am not convinced that my contact at the High-End Department Store knew much about social media and general best practices for running such a program. As a result, it was more like the Wild West when it came down to the brass tacks of doing this. I was rarely sure if I was doing the right thing. At several points I even wondered if this was for real. I later found out she wasn't following any of us on any of our social networks, had no idea what a hashtag was, and really had no plan for what she was going to do once everyone showed up at this "great party" she had planned.

So what does this all mean? She lost a great opportunity to maximize the value of a pretty cool concept. I sincerely loved the shoes and it is very much in my nature to share an awesome find with a friend. Because I wasn't engaged, most of my friends weren't. Yes – got a ton of new followers and some very positive responses to my posts on twitter, and yes – I am now one of the 200 consumers High-End Department Store is now following (versus the 17,000 consumers following them). But in the end, it was all kind of a big let down and when it came to the big party... well, lets just say none of the influencers really had a big draw. Which brings me to my final Lesson Learned.

5. Have a plan. Social Media may seem all fun and games... but it isn't.

It may feel like a casual and spur of the moment channel, but it is ANYTHING but if you are a marketer looking to Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, and the host of other consumer focused social media channels to reach your customers. It is just as calculated, structured, and thought-through as the commercials you shoot, the ads you design, and the marketing events you plan. The only difference – it has to "look" simple, casual, and fun.

Your plan needs to include:

- How you are going to identify and enlist your influencers, how you are going to get them started and keep them engaged, and what the next program is when this one comes to its conclusion.
- What you want to get from the program or activity. What does success look like? How are you going to measure it? What is your plan for course corrections along the way?
- And most importantly, *how does this activity fit into the larger picture of all of those ways you market to and engage with your customers*

After all, if I read about a cute pair of Sam Edelman ballet flats and a Girl's Night Out Shoe Event on my friend's blog and I go to the store and NOONE knows about the party, the shoes, or anything else...there is a huge break in your marketing strategy.

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About the author...Jerilyn MacLaren-Hall, XD Strategist



Jerilyn has been promoting Experience Design or Human Interaction Design for 10 years. During that time, she has personally led over 200 experience design projects including both traditional usability research and design projects, as well as more strategic efforts focused on cross-channel marketing, service, and support experience design. In addition to her project delivery efforts, Jerilyn has developed several points of view over the course of her career – the most recent of which address topics such as: Social Media, Enterprise 2.0, Mobile Web Design and Advertising, 2.0

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Prior to joining MISI, Jerilyn worked for Accenture where she led their Communications and High Tech User Experience Lab for North America. During that time, her work focused on the Communications, High Tech, and Media & Entertainment industries with a focus on B2C, B2B, B2G, and B2E audiences. She also became very interested in how technology could be leveraged to enhance customers' experiences and engage them at deeper levels.

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