



Influencer Marketing: Top Member Questions, Known Evidence and Research Gaps

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Executive Summary:

Influencer marketing was one of the most frequently asked member topics last year. Members across constituencies, including marketers, media and agencies, inquired about various aspects of influencer marketing. Analyzing the Knowledge Center literature reviews on this topic reveal that the top influencer marketing questions cluster around six marketer needs: understanding the role of influencers in the marketing mix, identifying which audiences and platforms respond best, determining how much budget to allocate, managing influencer programs, measurement best practices and applying influencer content across emerging environments such as podcasts, retail media networks and creator-led commerce. The literature shows that influencer marketing is no longer treated as an experimental social tactic. It is increasingly positioned as a full-funnel marketing capability used for awareness, engagement, trust, consideration, purchase and, in some cases, product development (Sprout Social, n.d., as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b).

The clearest area of evidence, with the most available research, is on consumer influence and purchase behavior. Influencer recommendations appear especially relevant for younger consumers, with U.S. Gen Z social shoppers slightly more likely than Millennials to trust influencer or celebrity product recommendations, while global data showed Gen Z more likely than Millennials to have purchased from influencers and celebrities in 2024 (Enberg et al., 2025; Statista, 2025b, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025a). Influencer content is also reported to be compelling relative to traditional advertising, with IZEA finding that 77% of U.S. consumers found influencer content more compelling than traditional ads and 79% had purchased a product after seeing it used by an influencer (IZEA, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b).

The second major evidence base concerns authenticity. Across the reports, authenticity is treated as a key driver of trust, engagement and performance, though it is defined inconsistently. Some sources define authenticity through relatability and expertise, while others identify signs such as showing facts and evidence, sharing personal experiences and engaging directly with audiences (Manatt & Bhaskaran, 2024; MikMak & Bazaarvoice, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025c). The reports also show that authenticity differs by audience: Gen Z may value authenticity, but one Sprout Social report suggested Gen Z also places comparatively more weight on quantifiable credibility such as follower count (Sprout Social, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025c).

Measurement is the most persistent pain point and the most important white space. Knowledge Center reviews found growing use of brand lift studies, post-purchase

surveys, dashboards, attribution links, promo codes, pixels, media mix modeling and creative pretesting, but there is a significant absence of validated standards, especially for full-funnel creator sponsorships across podcasts, social media and video (IAB & PwC, 2023, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2026). Measurement gaps are especially acute in the middle of the funnel, where engagement, integration into creator communities, watch time, sentiment, search activity and consideration are harder to connect to business outcomes (Follett & Doerrer, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2026).

The Knowledge Center reviews suggest that the strongest future research opportunities lie with standardizing full-funnel measurement, cross-platform comparability, causal evidence on authenticity, budget allocation by category, influencer effectiveness by demographic intersection, retail media network and creator integration, influencer or creator sponsorship measurement best practices and organizational ownership of influencer programs. The literature reviews identified some industry practices, but not strong empirical guidance on what works best, for whom, under what conditions and how influencer investments should be optimized relative to other media.

Top Member Questions:

ARF member questions are focused on how influencer programs should be structured, measured, scaled and integrated with other marketing channels. One media member asked for current trends, the role influencers play, who manages programs, where budgets sit, the size of the market and the percentage of marketing budgets allocated to influencer marketing (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b). This reflects a broad strategic concern: whether influencer marketing should be treated as a channel, a content source, a commerce tool or an integrated capability.

Another question centered on audience differences, especially by age, gender and generation. The member asked whether resources existed for age and gender breakdowns, particularly women ages 18-45 and Gen Z versus Millennials, as well as whether different platforms have different performance strengths (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025a). This reflects a targeting and planning need: marketers want to know whether influencer marketing should be weighted differently by audience segment and platform.

Another question was for research on the effectiveness of authenticity in brand messaging on social platforms, particularly for paid, owned and earned influencer marketing (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025c). This suggests that marketers recognize authenticity as central to creator effectiveness, but need stronger definitions, evidence and measurement frameworks.

Creative strategy was another area of interest. A marketer member asked what percentage of creative attributes should be influencer creative, and the Knowledge Center research found that the answer varies by product, audience, campaign objective, channel, platform and broader strategy (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025d). This question points to a broader challenge: influencer content is not only media inventory, but also

a creative asset that can be repurposed across paid social, retail media, CTV, email, display, websites and digital out-of-home.

An agency member asked about measurement solutions, especially when paid media is not involved. They asked which industry solutions can measure brand lift or perception shifts driven by influencer content without relying on paid media support (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025e). This reflects a common issue for agencies or production partners that make influencer content but do not control the paid distribution, making conventional exposure-based measurement harder.

Another influencer topic was about full-funnel measurement across podcasts and social media. A marketer member asked for best practices to measure creator content across audio and video podcasts and social media, with an initial focus on upper-funnel solutions and future interest in lower-funnel reporting (ARF Knowledge Center, 2026). This question shows that creator sponsorships are expanding beyond social feeds into podcasts and other content ecosystems, but standards are still underdeveloped.

Finally, a media member asked whether retail media networks use influencers differently from traditional digital media (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025f). This question reflects the convergence of social commerce, retail media, first-party data, creator content and lower-funnel sales activation.

What the Available Research Reveals:

Influencer marketing is growing and becoming more central to marketing strategy

The literature reviews consistently describe influencer marketing as a growing and maturing area of marketing investment. EMARKETER projected U.S. influencer spending to grow to \$13.74 billion by 2027 (Voss et al., 2025, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b).

Budget evidence also points to growth: Linqia found that 31% of surveyed U.S. enterprise marketers spent more than \$5 million on influencer marketing in 2024, up from 10% in 2023, and 89% reported budget increases in 2024 (Linqia, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b). The reports also indicate that influencer marketing is absorbing meaningful shares of marketing budgets: Influencer Marketing Hub found that almost 12% of marketers and industry leaders allocated 50% or more of their marketing budget to influencer marketing, while Linqia found that 19% of enterprise marketers dedicated 50% or more of their marketing budget to influencer marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025; Linqia, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b).

Influencers affect the full consumer journey, especially among younger consumers

The evidence base is strongest for the idea that influencers can affect awareness, consideration and purchase behavior. Rakuten Advertising found that nearly eight in ten global customers trust influencer recommendations, and 61% reported purchasing

because of an influencer recommendation in the past six months (Rakuten Advertising, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b). IZEA found that 77% of U.S. consumers considered influencer content more compelling than traditional ads, 85% were more likely to trust a sponsored influencer post than a post from an A-list celebrity and 79% had purchased after seeing a product used by an influencer (IZEA, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b).

The reviews also show that influencer effects vary by generation. U.S. Gen Z social shoppers were slightly more likely than Millennials to trust influencer or celebrity recommendations, at 48% versus 44%, and globally 45% of Gen Z consumers purchased from influencers and celebrities in 2024 compared with 33% of Millennials (Enberg et al., 2025; Statista, 2025b, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025a). However, another source found that Millennials were more likely than Gen Z to be motivated to purchase by influencer marketing, at 42% versus 35%, which suggests that findings may vary by different research methods (Gewiese et al., 2025, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025a).

Platform roles differ, but comparative platform evidence is still limited

The reviews identify Instagram and TikTok as particularly important platforms, but the comparative evidence remains more descriptive than causal. Instagram remains a leading platform for influencer marketing, especially for younger and primarily female audiences, while TikTok has strong reach among younger audiences and high engagement rates (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025a). Statista reported that 78% of TikTok users purchased a product after seeing it used by an influencer, while Linqia reported that 40% of marketers considered Instagram the most important platform for influencer programs, followed by TikTok (Linqia, 2024; Statista, 2025a, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025a).

The literature also points to the expansion of influencer marketing beyond traditional social platforms. AdAge contributors predicted that YouTube's reach and connected TV growth would increase demand for deeper creator integrations beyond pre-roll or mid-roll ads, and that creator collaborations would expand into connected TV, out-of-home and experiential marketing (Follett, 2025, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025d). This indicates that the platform question is becoming a cross-channel creative and media planning question rather than a simple TikTok-versus-Instagram choice.

Authenticity is central, but not consistently defined

The research repeatedly identify authenticity as an important driver of influencer effectiveness. NCSolutions found that 34% of U.S. consumers valued authenticity in social media or entertainment-app ads, and 37% of Gen Z consumers appreciated when influencers shared personal aspects of their lives (NCSolutions, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025c). MikMak and Bazaarvoice found that shoppers trust authenticity through either relatability or expertise, with subject matter experts and everyday social media users viewed as more authentic than social media stars or celebrities (MikMak & Bazaarvoice, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025c).

The reports also suggest that authenticity has measurable creative indicators. Snap and MAGNA found that honesty, authenticity and knowledge were the top engagement drivers for brand-sponsored creator posts, while the top signs of creator authenticity were showing facts and evidence, sharing personal experiences and engaging in one-to-one conversations in comments (Manatt & Bhaskaran, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025c). A systematic review described authenticity as multi-faceted, including origin, alignment with societal expectations, inner integrity, individual interpretation and intrapersonal audience connection (Amini, 2025, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025c).

Influencer content is becoming a creative asset, not only a media buy

The research shows that brands increasingly use creator content beyond the creator's organic post. Linqia found that 94% of marketers used influencer content outside influencers' organic posts, with brand organic and paid social as the top channels, followed by website, email, display, connected TV and digital out-of-home (Linqia, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025d). Creator-generated content also became more prominent, with 81% of marketers working with creators to generate brand content without requiring those creators to post to their own channels, up from 58% in 2023 (Linqia, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025d).

There is also evidence that creator content can outperform branded content in some contexts. NCSolutions and TikTok found that creator content produced a 32% higher sales response than branded content, while a combination of creator and branded content generated a 23% higher incremental sales response than branded content alone (NCSolutions, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025d). This supports the idea that creator content may work best when integrated with branded assets rather than replacing them entirely.

Measurement is maturing, but standards are incomplete

The literature identified measurement as the most consistent operational challenge. Brands are under pressure to prove ROI, with metrics and ROI described as top priorities for influencer campaigns (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b). CMOs are also under pressure from CFOs and other C-suite leaders to prove influencer ROI clearly and consistently, using post-purchase surveys and campaign dashboards to connect influencer performance to revenue (Voss et al., 2025, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b).

For podcast and creator sponsorships, the available measurement methods include promo codes, discount codes, coupon codes, vanity URLs, surveys, pixels, website analytics, brand mentions, impressions and long-term brand tracking (Acast Team, 2024; Ad Results Media, 2025; Kaufer, 2021; Miller, n.d., as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2026). Podcast marketers also use broader digital measurement solutions, including ad delivery impressions, pixel-based attribution, coupon codes and vanity URLs, sales or purchase lift, brand lift studies and audience surveys (IAB & PwC, 2023, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2026). However, these measurement practices are still fragmented. The Knowledge Center research on this topic found that

most best practices were industry and vendor POVs rather than validated standards, and that there was a lack of published research on full-funnel creator sponsorship measurement (ARF Knowledge Center, 2026).

Retail media networks are an emerging influencer use case

An investigation into the retail media and influencers suggests that influencer marketing and RMNs are converging because RMNs bring first-party data and commerce signals, while influencers bring creative, trust and audience relationships (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025f). LTK and Northwestern University found that creator marketing is a top priority for retail media networks and that 82% of RMNs are offering creator solutions (LTK & Northwestern University, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025f).

The research indicate that RMNs can use first-party data, loyalty programs and customer trend insights to make creator content more personalized and relevant, and that creator content can be extended into connected TV and in-store screens (Yegorova, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025f). Retailers including Walmart, Amazon and Target are also trying to monetize creator networks and affiliate programs, though financial structures remain custom and evolving (McCoy, 2025, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025f).

White Spaces & Potential Research Opportunities:

Standardized full-funnel measurement: The available literature list many measurement tactics, but they do not establish a validated framework that connects exposure, attention, authenticity, engagement, search, consideration, conversion, repeat purchase and brand equity across social, podcast, video and retail media environments (ARF Knowledge Center, 2026). Future research could test which methods best explain short- and long-term outcomes for influencer campaigns.

Mid-funnel measurement: The podcast and sponsorship research notes that brand lift studies can measure awareness, consideration and favorability, but the middle funnel is especially difficult because it involves always-on behaviors, community integration and engagement quality rather than one-time exposure effects (Follett & Doerr, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2026). Future studies could define and validate mid-funnel metrics.

Causal evidence on authenticity: The literature strongly asserts that authenticity matters, but it does not consistently define authenticity or isolate its causal effect from relatability, expertise, entertainment, production quality, follower count or creator-brand fit (Amini, 2025; Manatt & Bhaskaran, 2024, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025c). Future research could experimentally test different dimensions of authenticity to determine which elements move trust, attention, brand lift and purchase intent.

Cross-platform comparability: Knowledge Center research identify Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, podcasts, CTV, retail media and in-store screens as influencer environments, but there is little comparable evidence showing which platforms perform

best for which objectives and audiences (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025a). Future research could compare platforms using consistent outcomes, creative formats and audience definitions.

Budget allocation and incrementality: Knowledge Center research identified a few high-level spending benchmarks, but they did not find conclusive guidance on optimal influencer budget share, category-specific allocation or marginal ROI versus other media (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b). Future research could examine the point at which additional influencer investment produces diminishing returns and how influencer spend should be allocated, especially as part of the overall marketing budget.

Audience intersectionality: The literature review found that published sources often treat age/generation and gender separately rather than jointly (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025a). Future research could examine intersections such as Gen Z women, Millennial women, older social shoppers, multicultural audiences, category buyers and platform-specific subcultures.

Organizational ownership and operating models: The literature shows that influencer programs may be managed in-house, through influencer agencies, through social or PR agencies, through platforms or through hybrid models, but published sources did not provide conclusive research on where budget control sits inside organizations (ARF Knowledge Center, 2025b). Future research could examine which operating models produce better outcomes, lower costs, stronger governance and better measurement.

Retail media and creator measurement: RMNs are offering creator solutions and using first-party data to target shoppers, but spend allocation, partnership economics, incrementality measurement and long-term brand effects remain unclear (McCoy, 2025, as summarized in ARF Knowledge Center, 2025f). Future research could test whether RMN-enabled creator campaigns outperform standard retail media, standard influencer campaigns or a combination of both.

Potential Future Research Questions:

1. What combination of metrics best predicts influencer marketing ROI across upper-, middle- and lower-funnel outcomes?
2. Which platforms are most effective for influencer campaigns when measured using comparable methods?
3. Do retail media network creator programs improve sales, brand equity and loyalty beyond standard RMN placements?
4. How should brands measure influencer content when there is no paid media exposure data, such as organic posts, earned influencer content or production-only agency relationships?
5. How do podcast host-read, video podcast and non-host-read creator sponsorships differ by funnel stage?

6. How should marketers allocate influencer budgets across creator fees, paid amplification, retail media, affiliate links, content repurposing and measurement?
7. How do influencer effects differ by demographic intersection, including Gen Z women, Millennial women, older social shoppers and category-specific buyer groups?
8. What is the incremental value of creator-generated content when added to branded content, and when does it outperform professionally produced creative?
9. Which dimensions of authenticity drive brand trust, purchase intent and sales, and do these vary by generation, platform or product category?
10. Which organizational models - in-house, agency-led, platform-led or hybrid - produce the strongest influencer marketing outcomes?

Sources:

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