

Influencer Marketing in the Age of AI: Authenticity That Performs

04.16.2026

IN A WORLD OF AI

Authenticity Is the Only Thing You Can't Fake

And in a crowded space, it's what makes people stop scrolling.



Meet Your Presenters



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*VP,
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01 WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

02 INFLUENCER IN YOUR MEDIA MIX

03 PERFORMANCE ENHANCEMENT

04 CREATIVE TODAY AND TOMORROW

05 KEY TAKEAWAYS & OPPORTUNITIES

Value to the Consumer



The Power of Trust-Driven Communities



Influencers build **loyal communities** rooted in who they are—not just what they post.



Built on Reliability



Creators offer what brands can't manufacture: **authentic relatability.**



Influence Has No Age Limit



Influencer marketing spans every **platform, niche, and demographic.**

You have a decision to make.

→ **A trip to plan**

You want somewhere real, not a listicle.



→ **A room to renovate**

You need a taste you can actually trust.



→ **A big purchase**

You want to get it right the first time.



So where do you go?

→ **AI**

Not a bad place to start. But an LLM is a pattern recognizer.



→ **Someone who actually gets you**

For most of us, that person already exists. Someone we trust to just tell us the truth.



AI Starts the Conversation. Humans Make the Call.

Consumers trust AI enough to research — but not enough to decide. That gap is where creators win.

STEP 1 – AI

The filter, not the answer

Consumers use AI to quickly narrow options — asking for product comparisons, category overviews, and shortlists. It's fast, useful, and impersonal.

ONLY
20%
fully trust AI to decide

THE
TRUST
GAP

STEP 2 – HUMAN

The reassurance that closes it

Before committing, consumers seek a real voice — a creator, reviewer, friend, or community member whose opinion they've come to trust over time.

Influencer Value: Trust Over Expertise

“Consumers don’t trust people just because they’re ‘experts.’ They trust people who sound like people.”

(Typeform, 2025)



People don’t follow influencers because they’re experts. They follow them because they trust their authentic opinions and relatable experiences.



People don't follow creators because they need something

They follow because they want to feel seen, understood, and part of something

01

The Friend Effect

⇒ Followers develop parasocial bonds — one-sided relationships that feel deeply personal.

02

Advice, Not Advertising

⇒ Influencer recommendations feel like a trusted friend's opinion, not a pitch.

03

Authenticity Drives Action

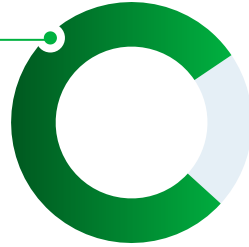
⇒ Influencer content turns genuine connections into measurable results, driving engagement and purchase decisions through trusted voices.

Audiences trust voices they can relate to

86%

of consumers make a purchase inspired by an influencer at least once a year.

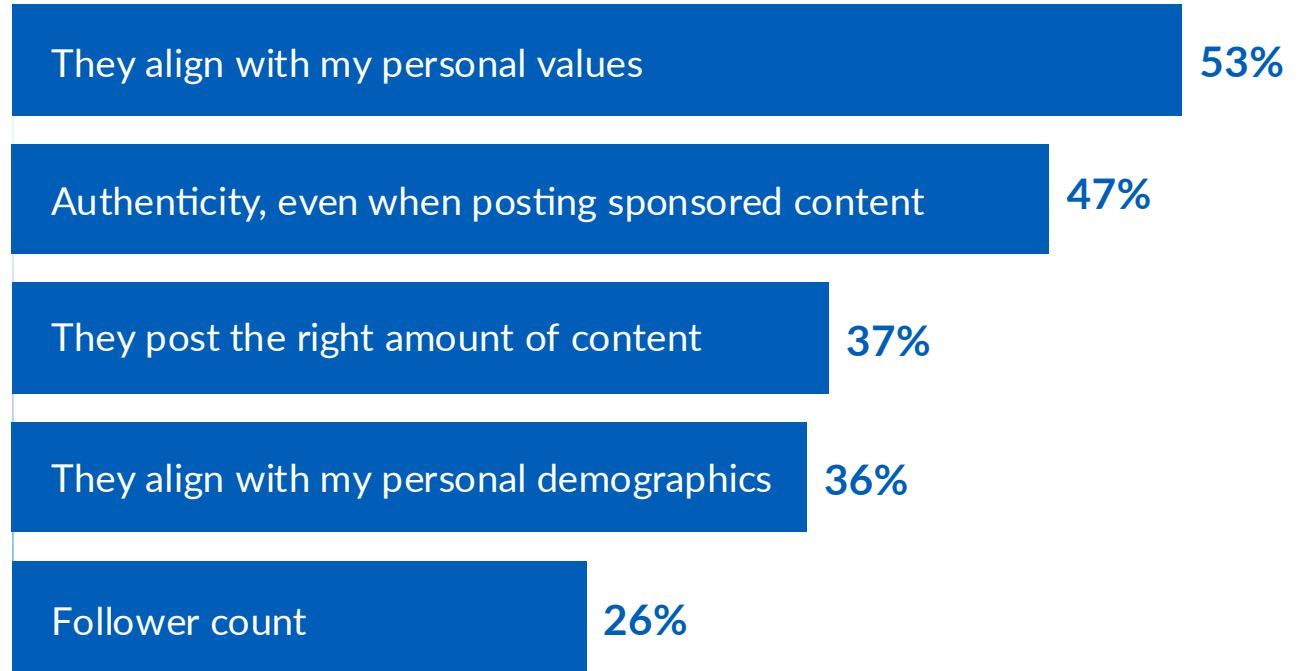
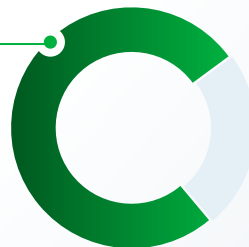
(Social Native, 2026)



76%

of consumers favor content created by influencers over professionally scripted ads

(IZEA, 2025)



Qualities consumers look for in influencers, eMarketer, Feb 2024

Relevance Across Generations

- ✓ YouTube and Facebook demonstrating broad cross-generational reach
- ✓ TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat skew younger, but adoption among 30–49 and even 50–64 audiences remains significant
- ✓ Social engagement is not confined to Gen-Z

Who uses each social media platform?

% of U.S. adults who say they use each platform

	Ages 18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
YouTube	95%	92%	85%	64%
Facebook	68%	80%	74%	57%
Instagram	80%	62%	40%	19%
TikTok	63%	44%	30%	12%
WhatsApp	37%	40%	30%	20%
Reddit	48%	35%	16%	6%
Snapchat	58%	31%	13%	4%
X (formerly Twitter)	33%	25%	16%	10%
Threads	15%	10%	6%	3%
Bluesky	6%	5%	3%	2%
Truth Social	1%	3%	5%	4%

Source: Pew Research Center, 2025

Note: Responders who did not give an answer are not shown. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb 5-June 18, 2025

Trust and Human Connection in the Age of AI

AI Content Era



AI is accelerating content production.
But scale ≠ trust.

- ✓ AI increases efficiency and optimization
- ✓ Automated content is rising across channels
- ✓ Consumers are becoming more skeptical of brand messaging

The Human Advantage



Trust, voice, and authenticity
drive performance.

- ✓ Creators translate brand messages in ways other channels can't
- ✓ Audiences respond to human perspective over automation
- ✓ Authentic creator connection drives deeper engagement & action

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Value to the Brand



Harnessing Authenticity



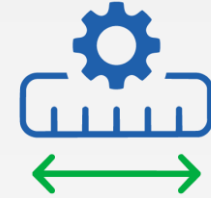
Creator marketing commands genuine, peer-level trust and **delivers one-to-many reach at broadcast scale** for the generation that skips the ads.



Evolving Role in the Funnel



With precise boosting and platform-native commerce, creators own **every stage** of the purchase journey.



Measure from Day One



Influencer spend becomes **defensible ROI** with a framework that guides creator selection and aligns **goals to metrics**.

Trust is the New Scarcity

As AI floods every channel with synthetic content, the rarest signal is a real human voice — and that's what earns trust.



What AI can't fake is exactly what audiences trust most.



People Sense What's Real

When content becomes infinite, audiences scroll past manufactured, pausing only for what feels like real human connection.

Emotional Depth is Where Creators Win

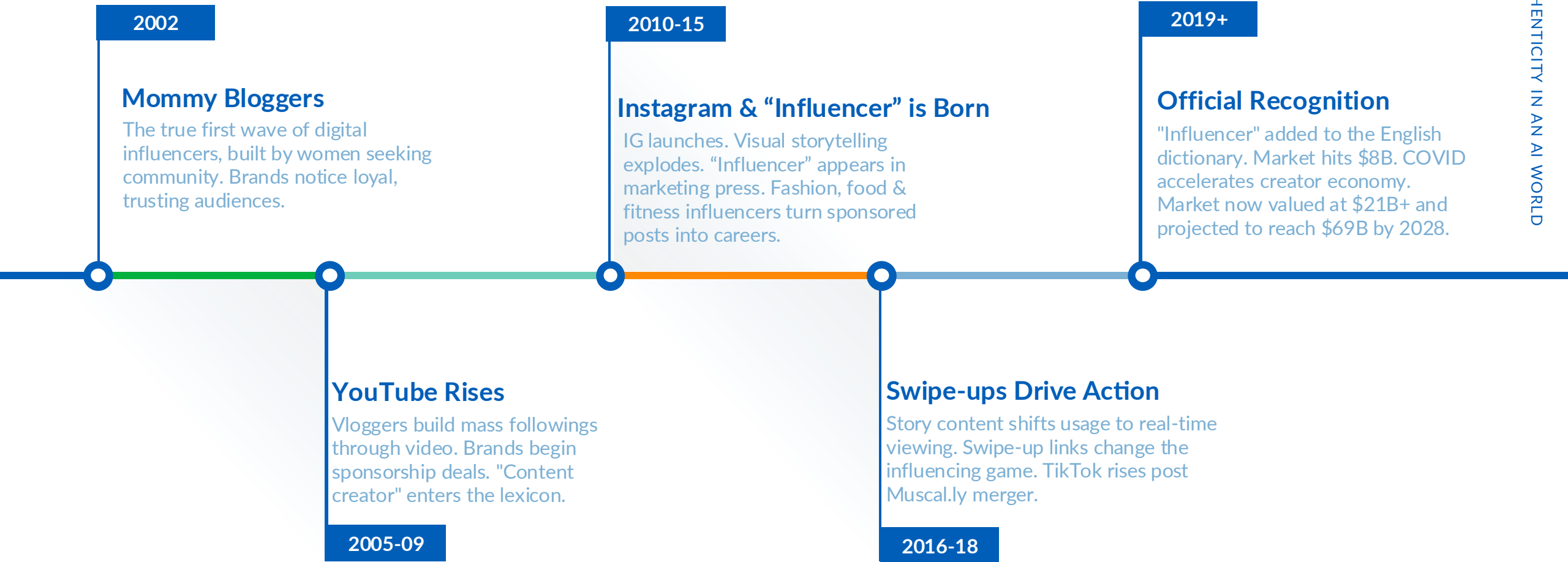
Unscripted creativity and community voices are trusted signals in digital marketing that can't be artificially replicated.

Creators Deliver Trust & Precise Reach at Scale

Influencers are one-to-many distribution engines with top creators commanding audiences that rival primetime viewership.

Where Did 'Influencer' Come From?

The Evolution of Creator Culture



Influencer Niches Span Culture, Identity, and Passion

Every audience has a creator they trust – across every topic, background, and interest.

Culture & Entertainment



Music, film, comedy, and pop culture creators reflect what audiences love and who they are.

Identity & Community



LGBTQ+, BIPOC, faith-based, and cultural heritage creators speak to audiences less represented in mainstream media.

Food, Health & Wellness



Nutrition, fitness, mental health, recipes; wellness creators build trust through consistency and personal stories.

Lifestyle & Life Stages



Parenting, travel, personal finance, and home creators reach audiences at every chapter of life.

Gaming & Tech



Gaming streamers and tech reviewers command loyal followings.

Value & Advocacy



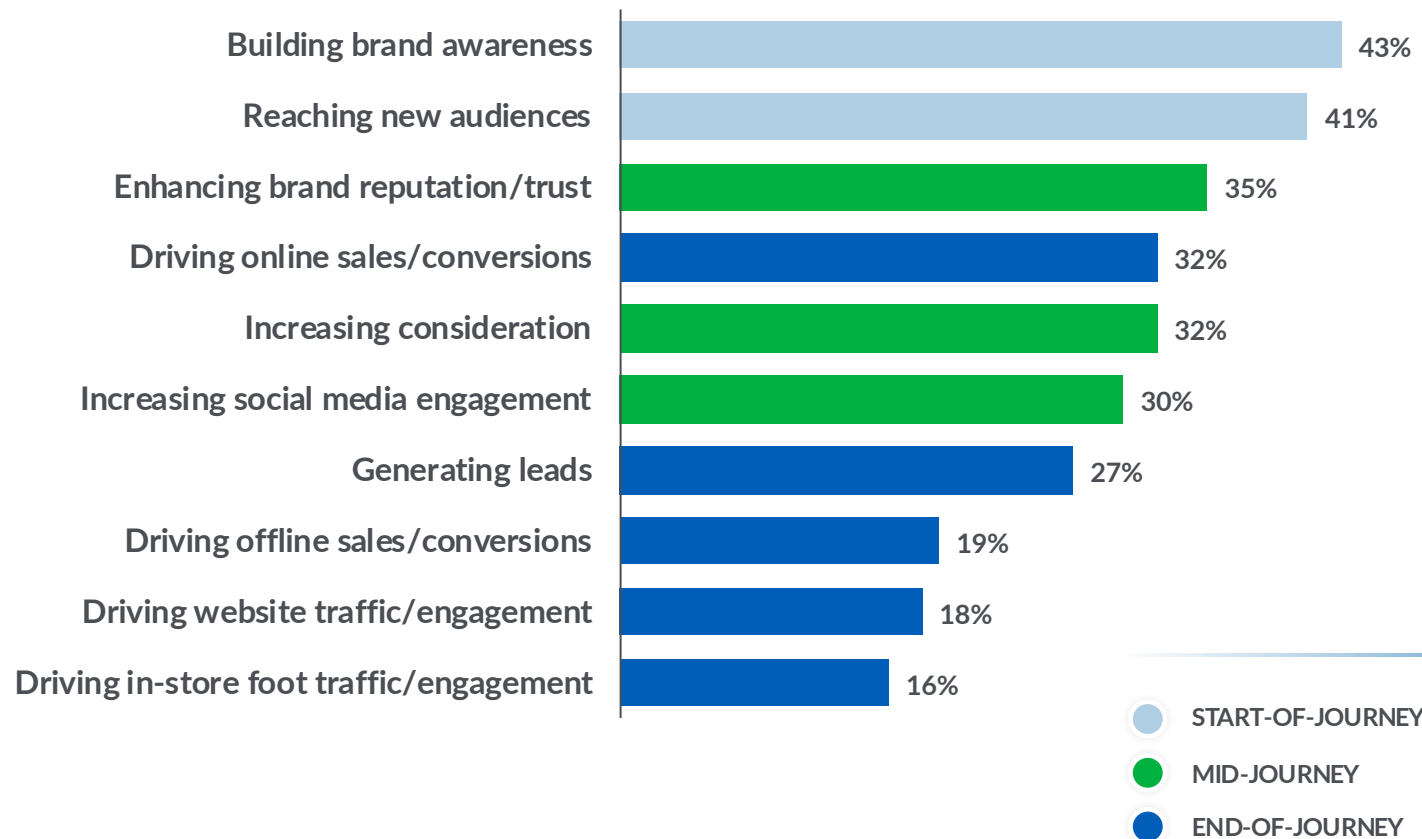
Sustainability, social justice, and cause-driven creators attract audiences who buy from brands who match their values.

Campaign Objectives Extend Beyond Awareness

Building brand awareness and reaching new audiences are still the top goals of creator marketing.

...but brands are increasingly relying on creators to drive lower-funnel actions like sales and generating leads.

Brands' Top Goals/Objectives for Creator Marketing % Selected As A Top 3 Goal/Objective



Influencer content meets consumers at every stage

AWARENESS
Discovery



→ Creator storytelling introduces a brand authentically & allows access to niche communities with built-in trust.

CONSIDERATION
Research Hub



→ Tutorials, comparisons & deep-dives build trust and educate buyers where they're already searching for recommendations.

CONVERSION
Decision



→ In-platform shopping, affiliate links, and strong CTAs empower buyers to make informed purchases.

The shift from standalone tactic to must-buy channel

48%

of ad spenders consider creators a 'must-buy'

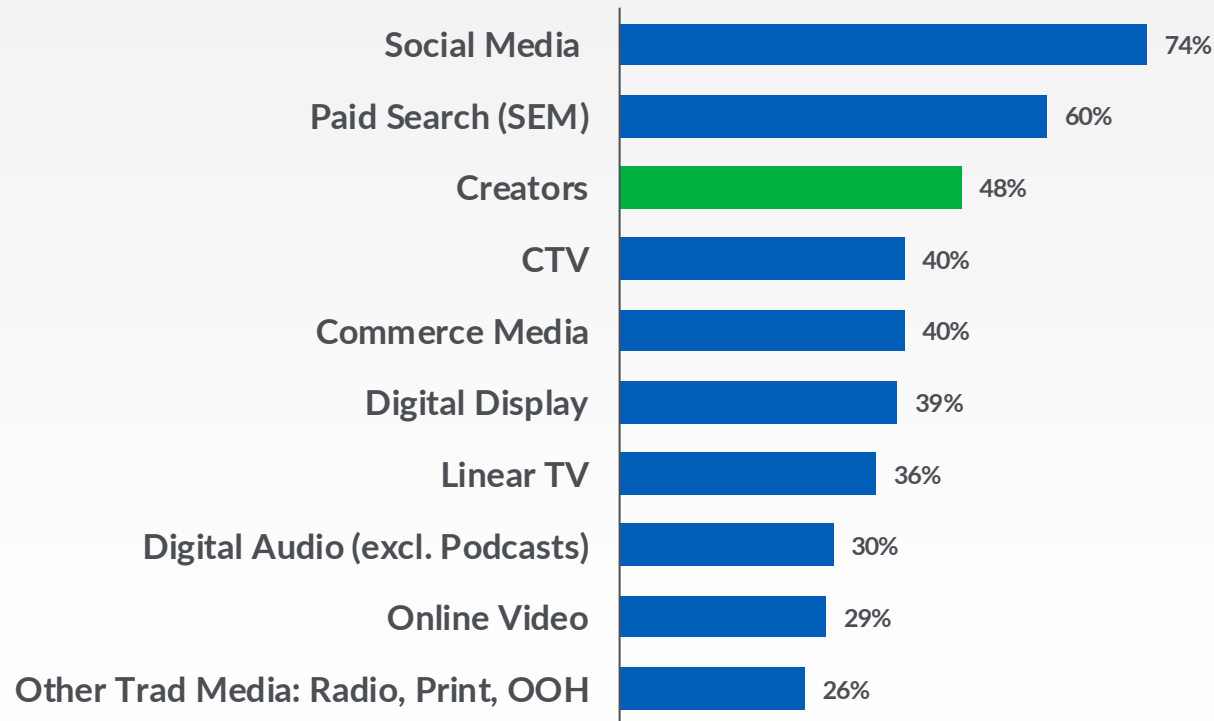


\$40B

expected creator ad spend in 2026



% of Brands that Consider the following a "Must Buy" *(i.e. Necessary for Media Plan)*



Source: IAB, Creator Economy 2025; eMarketer, 2025 US Creator Economy Ad Spending

Social Commerce Collapses the Traditional Funnel

Influencers are content creators, product reviewers, and sales drivers, simultaneously.

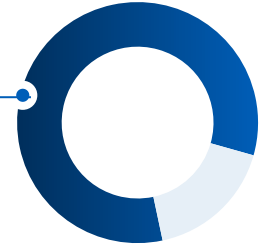
86%

of consumers search for product info on social media



67%

of consumers purchase directly through a social platform 1x/month



Consumers no longer leave the platform to buy.

The entire purchase journey – from first impression to last click – now lives inside the creator ecosystem.

Source: GRIN, 2025 Power of Influence

Influencer Content in Your Media Plan Architecture

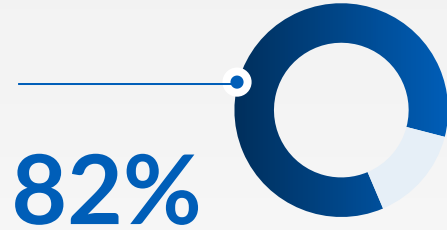
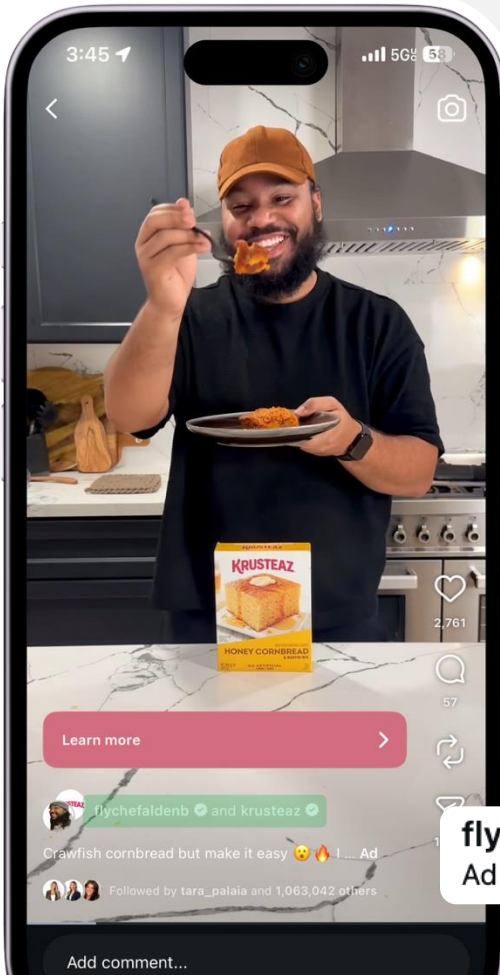
Business Objective		To maintain brand sales and profitability +X% YoY through generation of new users that will be measured by new account creations and leads	
Media Plan Objective		Increase awareness and drive consideration to maintain sales and position brand for long-term success.	
Business Target/Audience		A25-54	
Funnel Objective	Media Approach (by Funnel Stage)	Channel: Tactic	Tactical KPI / Optimization Metric
Awareness	Optimize campaigns towards Impressions and CPM to maximize visibility	Perion High-Impact CTV	Impressions/CPM
		Pinterest	Impressions/CPM
		Influencer – Organic Content (In-Feed)	Views
Consideration	Prioritize Landing Page Views and CPLPV to drive site traffic and encourage exploration to learn more about product	Meta Traffic	CPLPV/LPVR
		Pinterest	CPC/CTR
		Influencer – Organic Content (Stories)	Engagements/Clicks
Conversion	Drive Conversions while optimizing towards CPA to support business goals and drive sales	SEM	Conversion Rate/CPA
		Demand Gen	Conversion Rate/CPA BLS Responses
		Influencer – Meta Conversion (Boosting)	Conversion Rate/CPA
		Influencer – Affiliate Links	Acct Creations/Sample Orders/ Product Orders

Boosting

Extends reach & frequency of organic influencer content to reach even more users in our target audience

Collaboration Posts

Allows accounts to co-author posts, increasing exposure and engagement, contributing to brand authenticity, and deepening the community's brand trust.

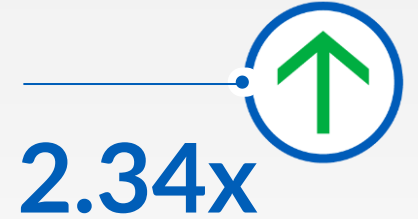
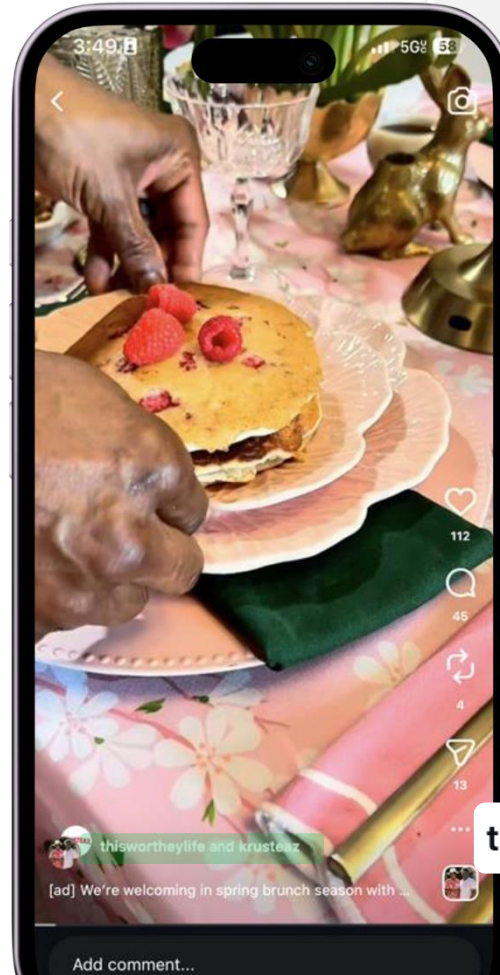


82%

of brands feel that influencer marketing content generates **higher-quality customers** than other types of marketing, leading to more impactful results

Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024

flychefaldenb and krusteaz Ad



2.34x

more interactions can be generated on posts featuring 1 additional collaborator vs. solo posts.

Emplifi, 2024

thiswortheylife and krusteaz

What Successful Brands Do Differently

Creator ad spend is projected to surpass **40 billion** in 2026, but measuring creator performance is the **#1** roadblock for **32%** of brands.



Common Challenges

Measurement is treated as an afterthought rather than incorporated from the start.

Campaign strategy is **built for awareness** but **gets evaluated on sales** – mismatched goals muddy results.

Platform inconsistencies and ever-changing algorithms make **cross-channel comparison unreliable**.



Best Practices

Lock in KPIs **pre-briefing** to guide smarter creator selection and goals up front.

Align content & goals to funnel stage. **Awareness** = reach, impressions. **Conversion** = engagements, clicks, sales.

Own the data: build internal benchmarks, standardize cross-platform definitions, and track performance vs. prior.

Red Lobster x Cheddar Bay Biscuit Mix

BACKGROUND

OVERVIEW

Reposition Cheddar Bay Biscuit mix as a versatile pantry staple – not just a side dish.

Target: W35-49, Married with kids, cooking-focused, value-conscious

GOAL

Drive awareness & increase sales for Red Lobster's at-home Cheddar Bay Biscuit mix. Measure success by maximizing reach and impressions while driving strong engagement through likes, comments, and shares.

SOLUTIONS



Partner with **6 creators** & generate **30 pieces of content** demonstrating ease of use and versatility through **relatable, family-friendly recipes** – reinforcing satisfying cravings & **enhancing familiar routines**.



Drive trial through creative culinary experiments, unexpected recipes + new meal occasions.



Ensure clear communication **during dual-brand approval process** without compromising message and content quality.

RESULTS



40%

Lift in sales during campaign period, largely attributed to organic, viral recipe post coinciding with market-wide sales.

ENGAGEMENT RATE

257%

ER increase VS. benchmark of 2.33%



ORGANIC VIEWS

3MM+

ORGANIC ENGAGEMENTS

248k+

Building a strong measurement framework

01

Set Goals Upfront

Quantitative: Reach, engagement rate, conversions, sales

Define all funnel objectives before creator briefing so that **goals drive creator selection, content strategy, and measurement.**

02

Take a Holistic Approach

Qualitative: Brand lift, SOV, creator quality

Pair quantitative data with qualitative signals for a complete ROI picture, avoiding reliance on one metric to tell the full story.

03

Standardize Internally

Process: Consistent metrics across all teams

Align all teams, platforms, and partners on the same definitions, avoiding distortion of comparisons over time.

04

Measure from Day One

Timing: Built in pre-launch

Treat measurement as a campaign input, not an output. Brands that own their data build a durable competitive advantage.

Measurement Toolbox

UPPER FUNNEL

GOAL: Awareness & Reach

CORE METRICS

- Reach
- Impressions
- Views

⊕ PLUS-UP

Brand Lift Study

Pre/post survey measuring awareness, message recall, favorability lift

MID-FUNNEL

GOAL: Engagement & Consideration

CORE METRICS

- Engagements
- Link Clicks & CTR
- Video Completion Rate

⊕ PLUS-UP

Custom Audience Build

Retarget users who engaged with creator content via paid social

LOWER FUNNEL

GOAL: Conversion & Sales

CORE METRICS

- Add-to-Carts, Leads
- Promo Code Redemptions
- Cost Per Acquisition (CPA)

⊕ PLUS-UP

Affiliate Program

Creator-specific affiliate links enable conversion tracking, revenue attribution, and performance-based payouts

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Value to Active Media Investment



Performance Enhancement



Use creator content throughout the plan arch to enhance performance on other channels.



Auction Economics



As paid efforts across digital platforms become more automated, creative is the most important lever to impact campaign performance.



Creative Advantage



Infusing UGC content into your current digital media campaigns is a sustainable way to improve results.

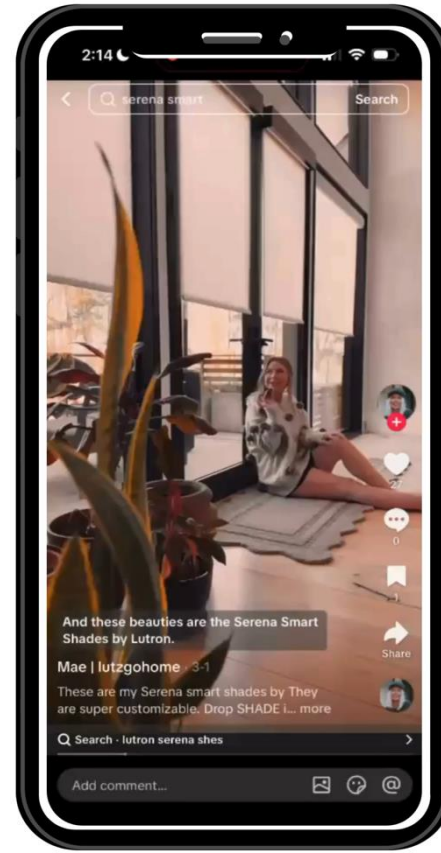
Authentic Content Lives Across Your Entire Digital Ecosystem



Instagram Reels



Instagram Carousel



TikTok



Pinterest



YouTube Shorts

Why Creative Matters



Auction Criteria

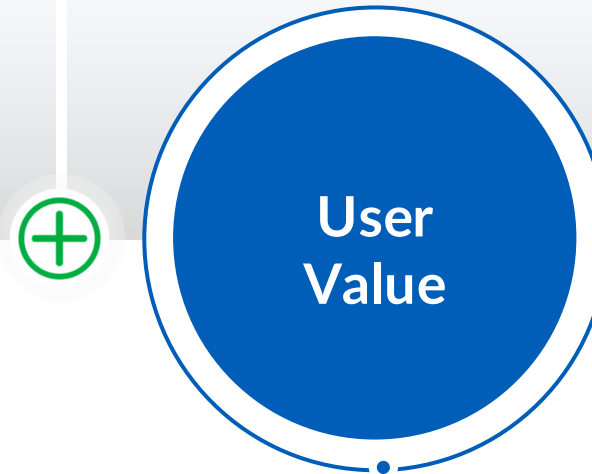
Maximizing Advertiser Value
(Objective + Audience)



Bid for optimization goal/objective (desired result)

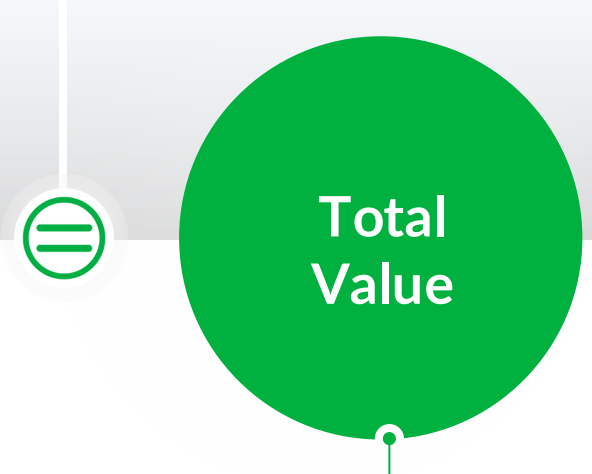
Likelihood impression shown to this person will lead to desired result

Optimizing Consumer Experience
(50% Creative Driven)



How interesting does the platform think the individual is going to find the ad

60% Of All Auction Outcomes Attributed to Creative



Ad with the highest value wins the auction

Optimal creative allows your ads to win the auction and achieve the best possible results.

The Main Ways to Diagnose and Elevate Creative



Fatigue

sets in when consumers become tired of seeing the same ad



Differentiation

via creative formats, placements, concepts, and tone



Creators

for direct response now listed on Meta's Performance 5

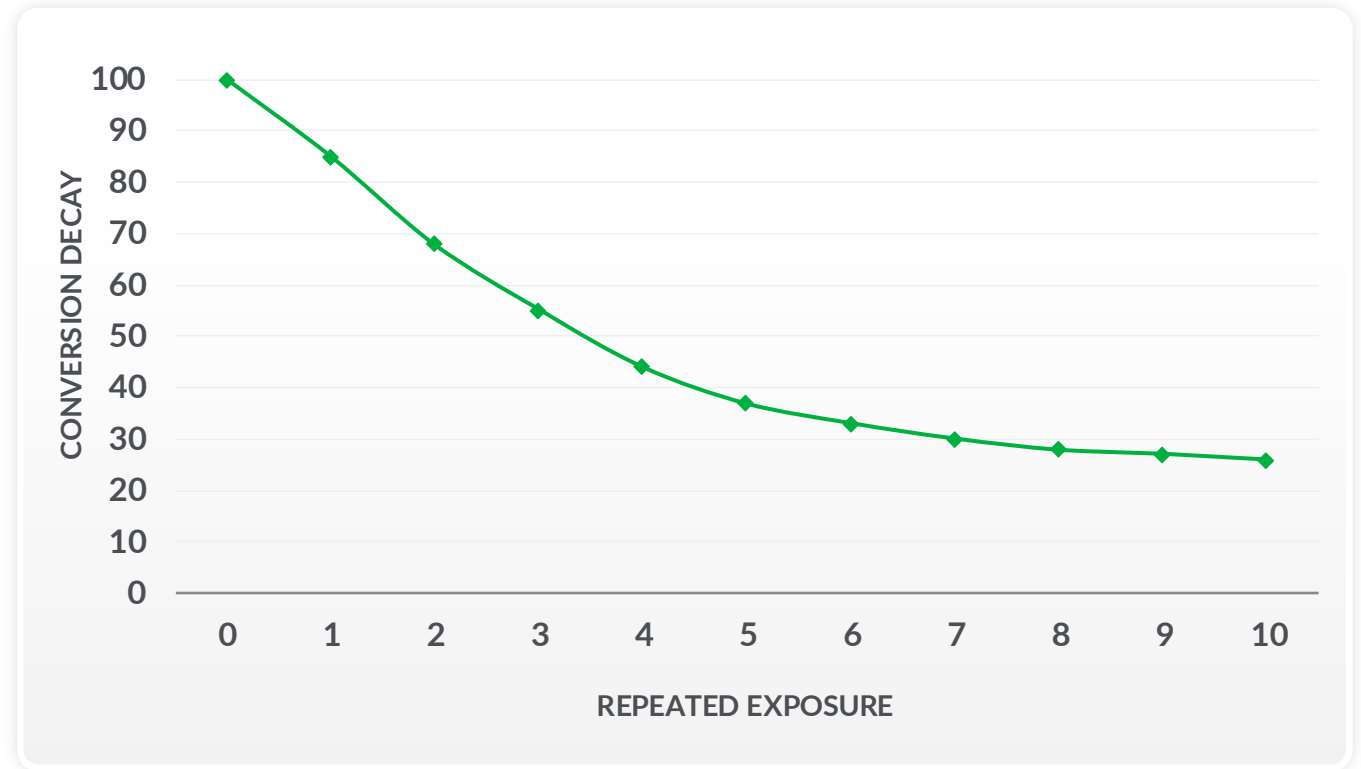


Increase the effectiveness of media dollars in the new machine learning environment

Creative fatigue can lead to degraded performance

At four repeat exposures, likely conversion decreases by about 60%.

This means there is a significant opportunity for fresh creative and to reach new audiences



60%

average drop in conversion rate after four repeated exposures



Building differentiated creative can help reach new audiences and boost ad performance

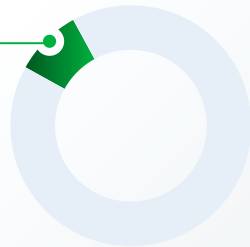
32%

improvement in CPA



9%

increase in incremental reach



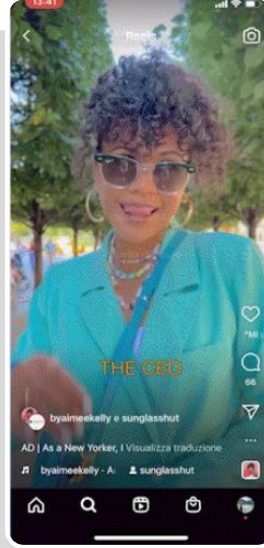
Source: Meta Creative Guide 2026

Examples of Differentiation

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Product and People	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Polished and Lo-Fi	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hero Product and Multi-Product
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Static and Video	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept and Message	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Creator Diversity

Infusing Creator Content Drives Impact Across Platforms & Placements

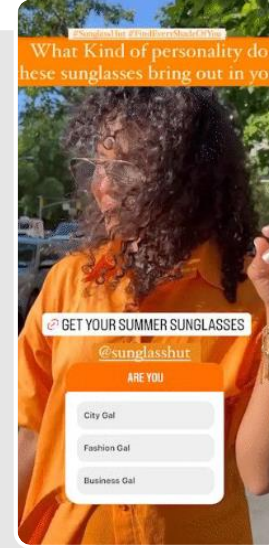
REELS



FEED



STORIES



STORIES



63%



of 18-35-year-olds trust what a creator says about a brand more than what the brand says about itself

58%



of people bought a new product or tried a new service in the past 6 months because of a creator's recommendation

92%



of consumers prefer the authenticity of user-created moments over polished ads

Diversify Your Techniques

Tailored, authentic, original content helps build connections with existing and new customers

#1 The Information



#2 Behind the scenes



#3 The product demo



#4 The comedy skit



#5 The wardrobe sequence



#6 The before & after



#7 The listicle



#8 The tutorial



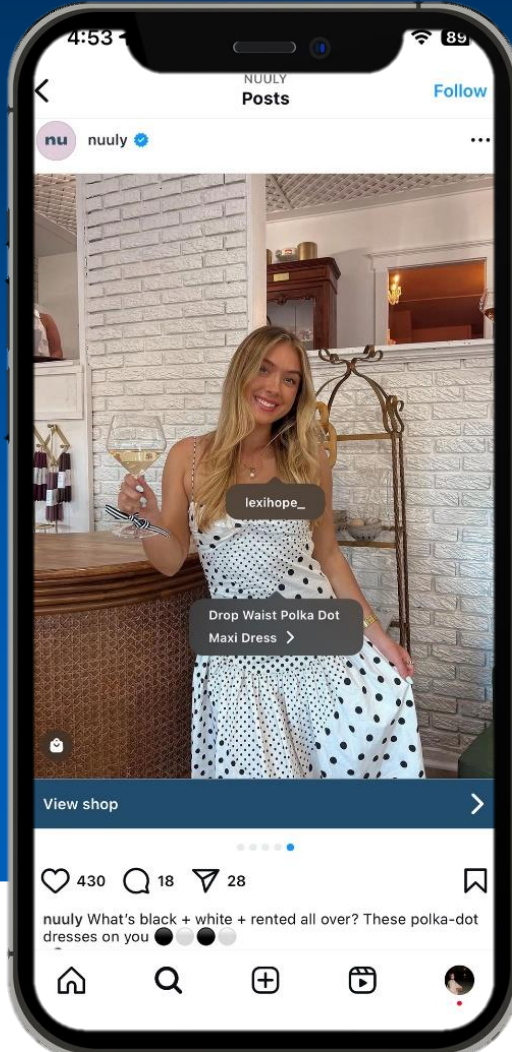
#9 The one-to-one



#5 The photodump

Not All Creator Content Is Built the Same

Content created by consumers or creators — not brands



Influencer Content



- ✓ Pay for audience reach
- ✓ Brand message is the priority
- ✓ Distributed to their following and can be used across paid media

User-Generated Content



- ✓ Pay for authentic content, not audience
- ✓ Feels organic and platform-native
- ✓ Built for use across paid media

Influencer = distribution UGC = performance

Traditional Creative Alone Is No Longer Enough

Brands need a new creative playbook.



Scroll-Past Risk

Polished ads are easy to skip right past



Creative Access Gap

No access to fresh assets to support ongoing campaigns



Creative Fatigue

Underperforming, plateauing, and outdated against current social best practices



Rising Media Costs

CPMs climbing, squeezing performance budgets

UGC is the Creative Advantage in an Automated Landscape



Authentic, platform-native creative



Scalable across every channel, not just social



Drives measurable performance results

UGC turns creative into a performance driver



UGC Drives Stronger Performance

Brand
Trust



93% of marketers say UGC outperforms brand content

Engagement &
Conversion Lift



UGC drives 6x more engagement and 29% higher conversions than brand content

Cost
Efficiency



UGC drives up to 4x CTR and 50% lower cost per click vs. traditional ads

UGC Delivers Across the Funnel

Awareness

Smart Home Technology

96%

of total impressions



Traffic

Grocery Retailer

11%

higher engagement rate vs. brand ads



Leads

Education

34%

lower cost per lead vs. brand ads

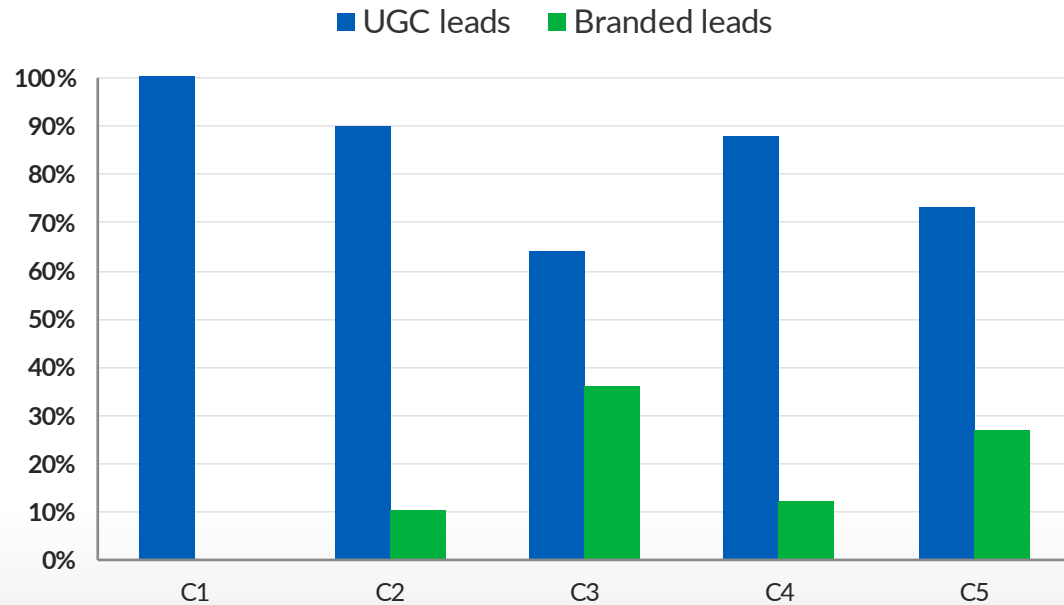


UGC as a Conversion Driver

OBJECTIVE

Evaluate if UGC video drives higher engagement and more efficient lead gen vs. branded assets

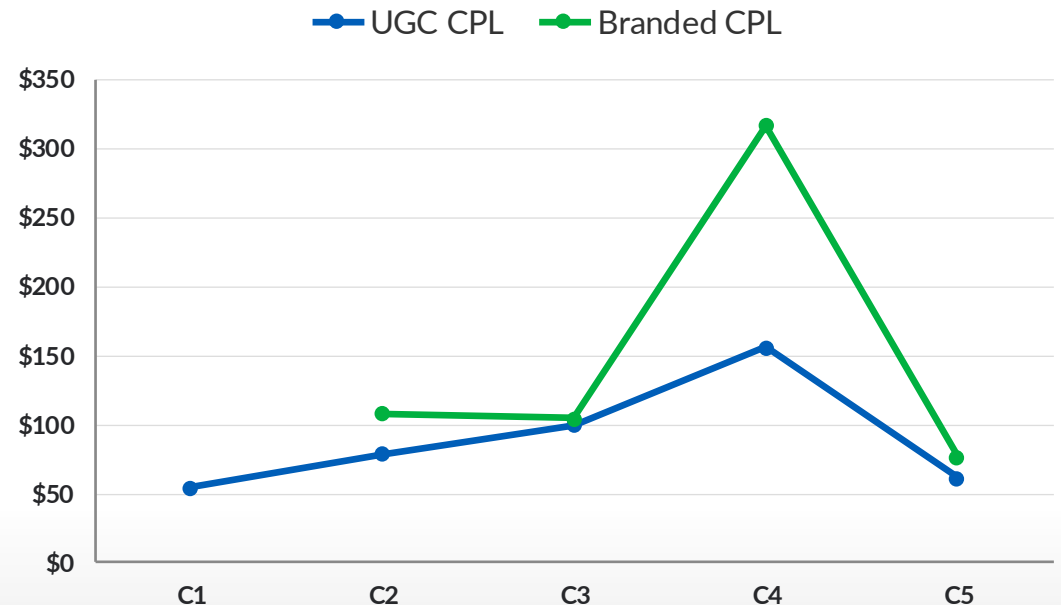
82% → of leads driven by UGC ads



STRATEGY

A/B test: branded (polished, brand-forward) vs. UGC (conversational, platform-native)

34% → more efficient cost per lead vs. branded



The Brands Winning Today Combine Both



Brand content drives reach. UGC drives trust. Together, they win — even in an AI-powered world.

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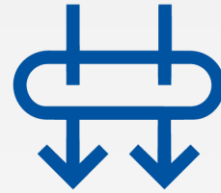
Value to Messaging



Understanding the creative spectrum



It is hard to predict the algorithms. Incorporate creative from across the spectrum.



AI infiltrating influencer



Even in the most authentic channels, use of automation tools is on the rise.

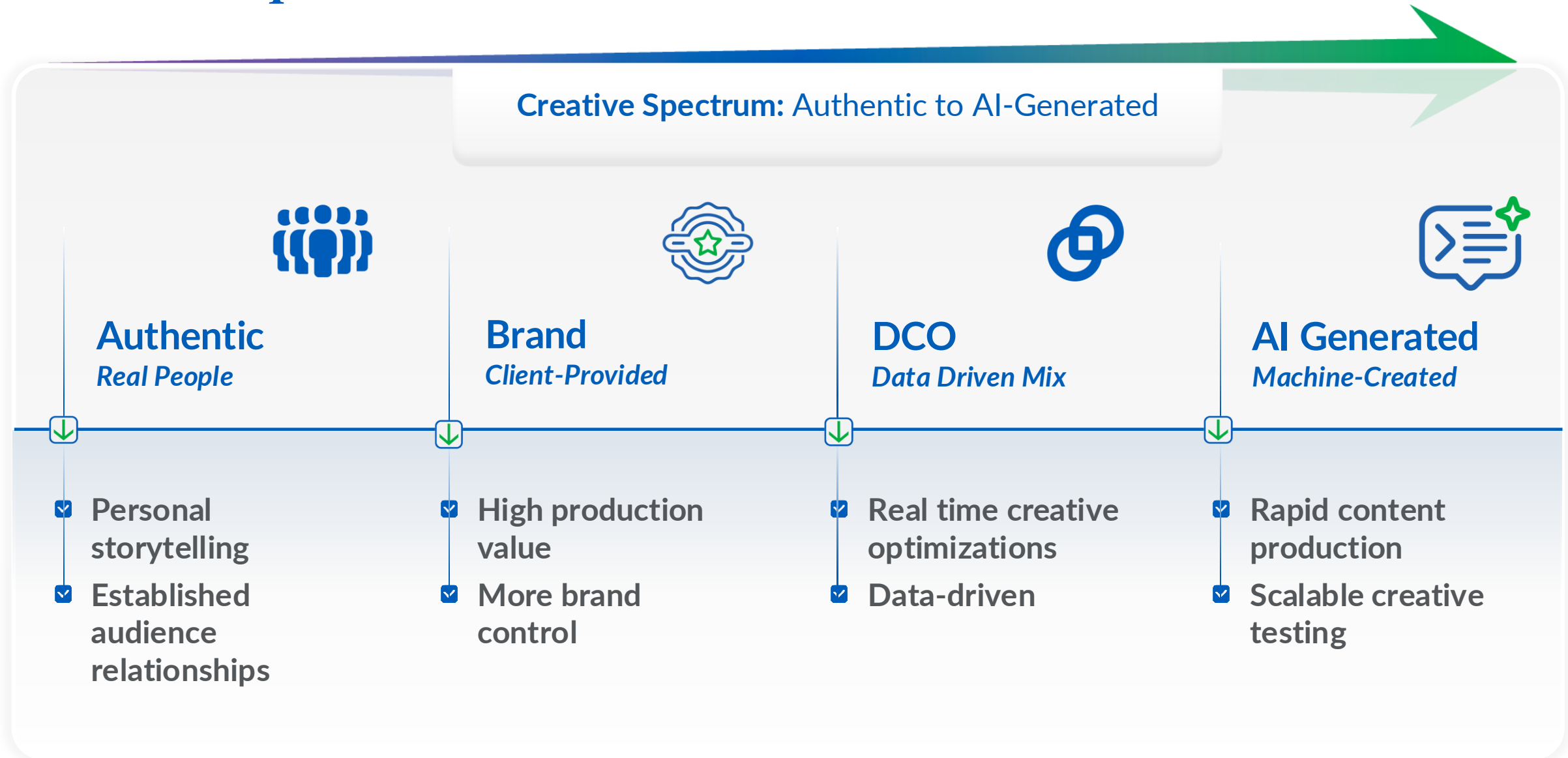


Creative mix today and tomorrow



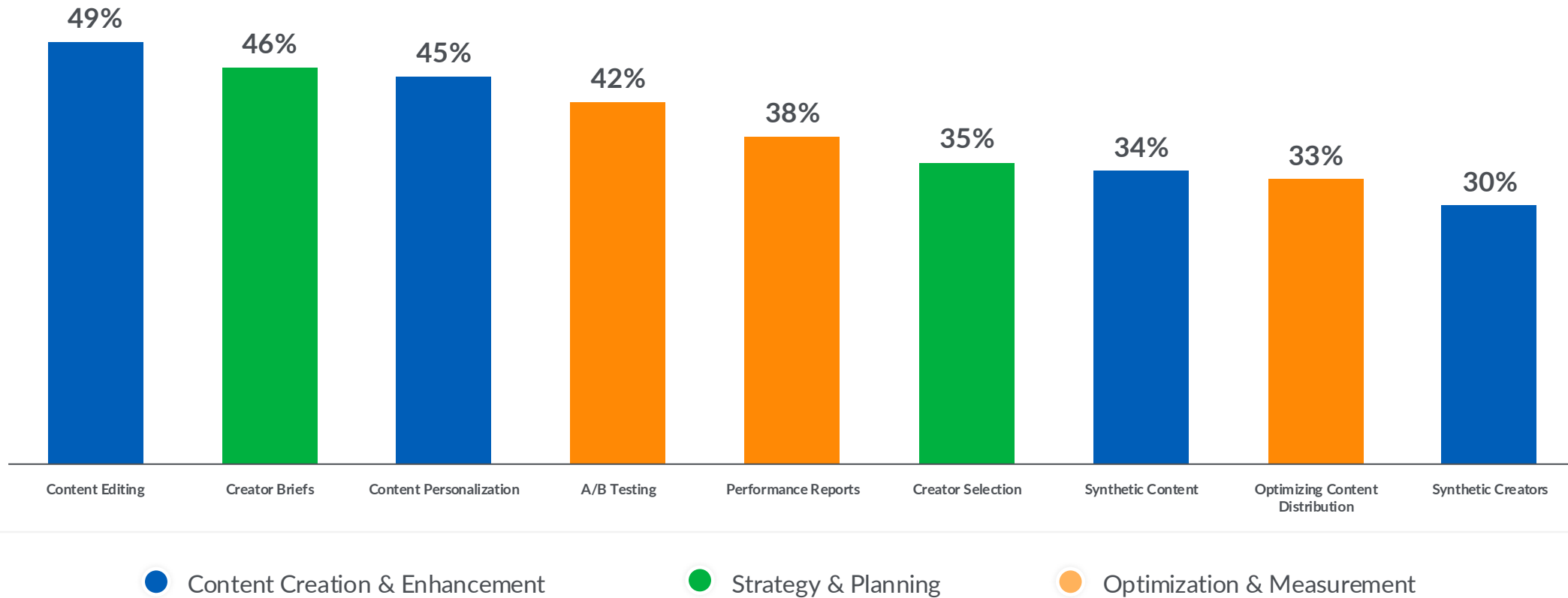
The creative mix of yesterday is no longer sufficient. The time to plan for this shift is now.

Creative Spectrum



The Rise of AI in the Creator Economy

% of Brands Using AI in Creator Campaigns by Task



Authenticity Remains the Biggest Concern in AI-Driven Creator Marketing

95%

of brands have concerns about
using AI in creator marketing overall



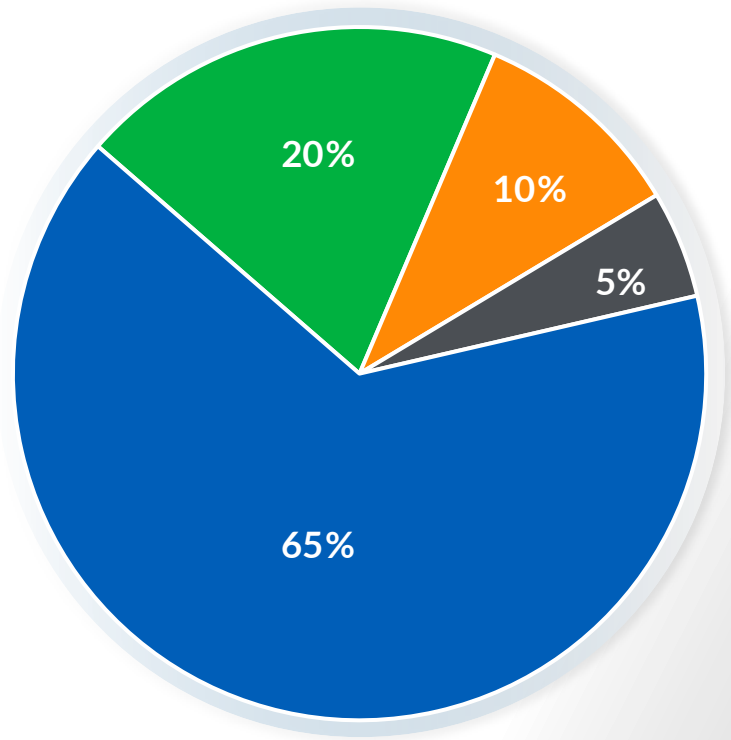
#1

concern brands have
about using AI for
creator marketing is
in removing the
human connection
throughout the
process

*AI can enhance creator marketing, but a human in the loop is
essential to get it right.*

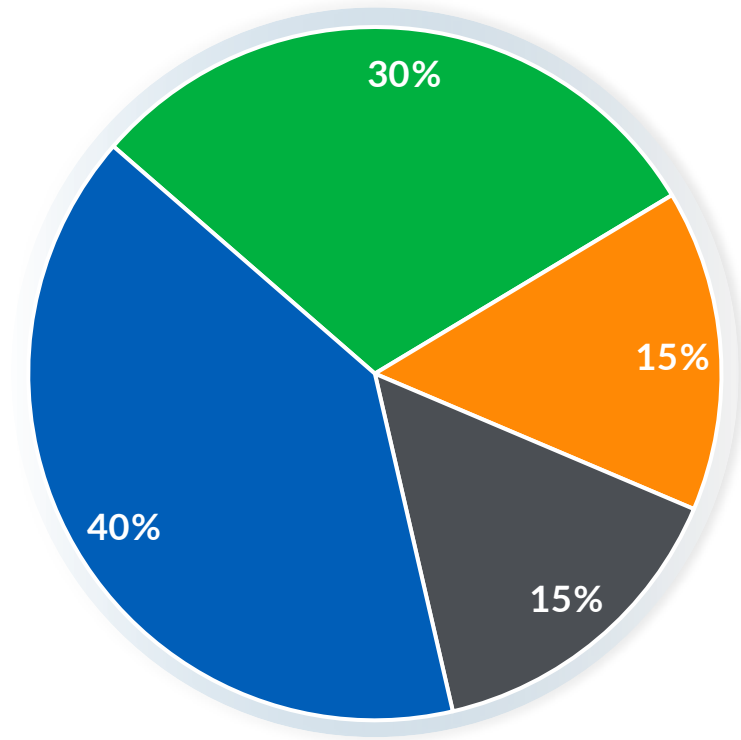
Creative mix in paid media today...and tomorrow

Digital Content Today



■ Influencer ■ UGC ■ Gen AI ■ Brand

Digital Content 2027



■ Influencer ■ UGC ■ Gen AI ■ Brand

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The Value of Real: Authentic Influence Wins Across the Board

Consumer



→ The unique strength of influencer marketing lies in trust, creator voice, and human connection—especially as AI accelerates.

Brand



→ Influencer plays a key role within the plan architecture as a scalable, one-to-many solution spanning the full funnel.

Other Media



→ Creator content strengthens other channels, driving performance and reinforcing the value of real, relatable content.

Your Message



→ AI-generated creative hasn't fully met the standard yet, as brands continue to question its authenticity and trust.

Come Talk to Us!



Influencer



Develop influencer concepts and creative thought starters tailored to your category

Create a sample roster of relevant influencers who fit your brand



UGC



Audit existing paid social campaigns for underperforming creative

Identify ads that have plateaued in platform or are facing fatigue



Affiliate



Audit how competitors are using affiliate and creator-driven commerce

Benchmark commission structures, program design, and creator incentives

Reach out to your Client Lead or mediatrends@harmelin.com to get started

About us



Harmelin Media specializes in strategic media solutions and has more than 40 years of experience helping clients navigate a rapidly changing media landscape across digital, traditional and lifestyle forms. The firm has grown with a diverse client roster including many Fortune 500 companies across an array of industries and is now one of the largest independent media service firms in the United States.

Harmelin's expertise is in managing the massive data sets that our clients and campaigns generate to develop strategic, channel-agnostic recommendations that generate business results and positive return on investment. We accomplish this while maintaining a long-term business focus, providing superior customer service and operating with 100% transparency in our operations. Our approach has resulted in unprecedented retention rates with both employees and clients.

Harmelin's current media billings exceed \$800 million across all digital and traditional channels on a local, national and international basis. We are a Google Premier Partner, Meta Business Partner and proud member of the ANA.

For more information, please contact info@harmelin.com or visit www.harmelin.com.