



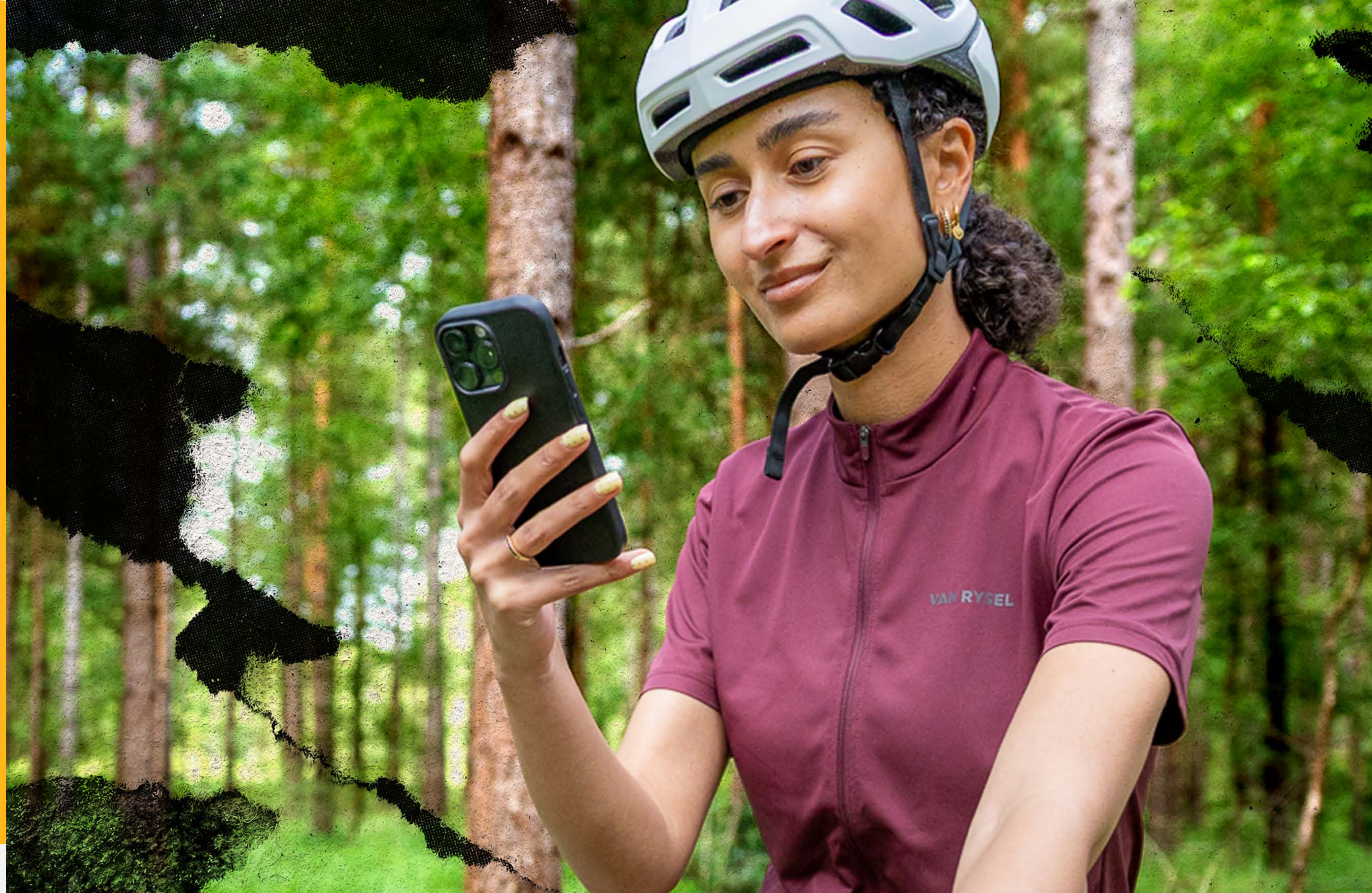
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Influencer Marketing in 2026

Why smaller influencers
now outperform the big names



Introduction



Influencer marketing is at an interesting juncture. For decades, brands have typically defaulted to high-profile partnerships with widely recognised public figures, and in the last decade, collaborations with major social media personalities remain a prominent example of that approach.

But in 2026, the most effective influencer marketing strategies are being built somewhere very different: inside smaller subcultures, powered by micro-influencers who command deep trust, niche credibility, and genuine cultural fluency.

The shift towards partnerships with influencers with smaller followings is down to cost efficiency and precision.

The influencer landscape has evolved away from visibility and reach metrics and towards valuing cultural alignment between the influencer their audience, and the brand.

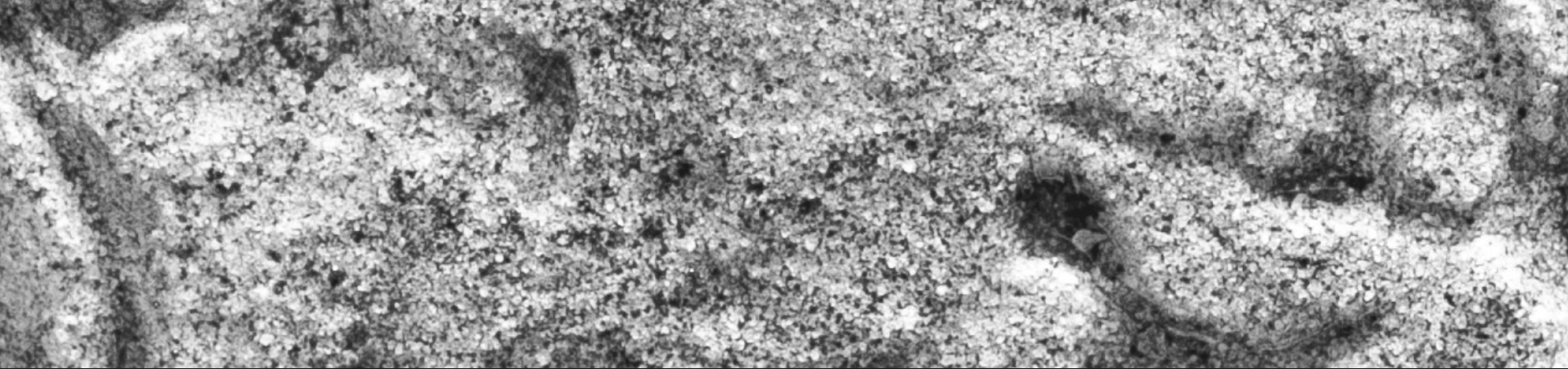
Micro-influencers with a smaller, but highly engaged audience covering niche demographics and interests can, in many ways, be more commercially rewarding to partner with than a one with a huge, but disparate and disengaged following.

In essence, brands are looking to invest in influencers who actually influence. The gold standard is someone who has credibility with their audience, and they trust their judgment and recommendations.

Micro-influencers now outperform big-name celebrities and influencers because they deliver higher trust, niche community access, and cost-efficient, scalable content. They provide a great route to sustained audience engagement and measurable commercial outcomes.

This short guide explains what micro-influencers are, why they matter more than ever, and how brands should build credibility-led influencer programmes that drive commercial results and long-term audience relationships.

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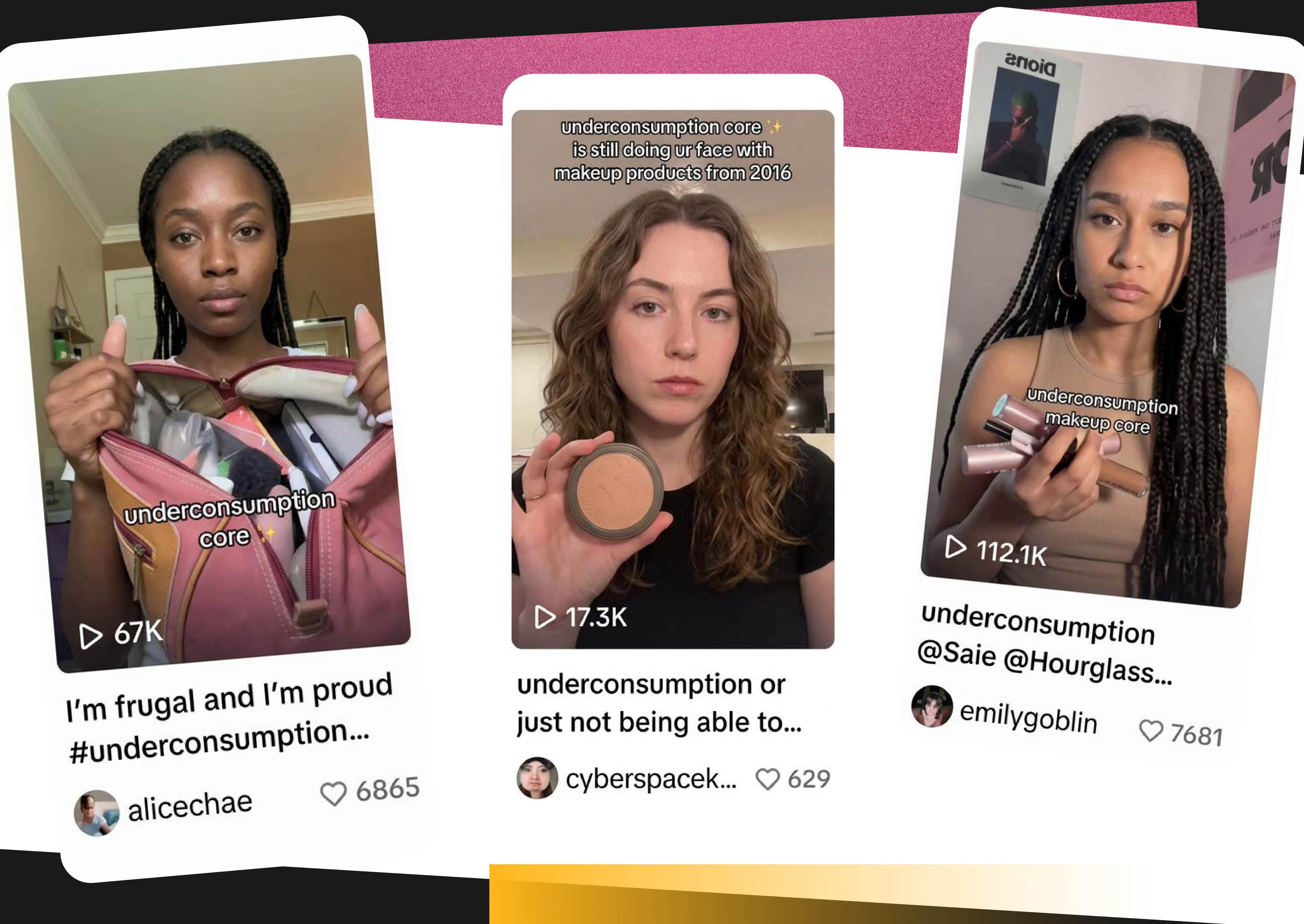


Understanding micro-influencers

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What are micro-influencers?

Micro-influencers are high-credibility, niche-focussed people who typically sit in the 5,000 to 100,000 follower range. Unlike celebrities, elite athletes or mainstream influencers, their platform is built on actively participating in and belonging to the same communities as their audiences.

How micro-influencers differ from traditional influencers

Traditional influencers operate on a reach-based model. Their value is in their ability to broadcast a message to a large audience. This works well for mass-awareness campaigns, but it often lacks the nuance and cultural specificity required to influence real behaviour.

Influencers with large followings also have an aspirational value, in that they portray the very highest level of expertise, lifestyle or success, which followers can admire but can't actually access.

Aspiration alone is no longer enough to drive meaningful action. Audiences increasingly recognise that high-profile figures often operate in a completely different reality: they have access to premium resources, specialist support, and opportunities that most people will never encounter.

Their recommendations can elevate brand perception, but they often feel distant from the everyday experiences of typical consumers or professionals. As a result, their content tends to inspire, but it rarely influences the practical decisions that shape behaviour, product choices, or community norms.

Micros, by contrast, sit much closer to the lived experience of their audiences. They work, create, experiment, volunteer, and participate in the same environments as their audiences, which gives them a level of authenticity and trust that traditional influencers often struggle to match. They encounter the same day-to-day frustrations, constraints, and challenges that mainstream public figures rarely face. Micro-creators resonate because they feel like one of us.

For brands, this distinction means micro-influencers are often better positioned to drive tangible behavioural change. This includes shaping purchasing decisions, guiding participation choices, or influencing community sentiment.



Why micro-influencers matter for brands

Audiences have become more fragmented, more discerning, and far more sceptical of polished, celebrity-led content. Fans want to hear from people who live and struggle like them. Micro-influencers sit inside this area. They're the ones who are speaking the language of their community every day without needing a briefing document.

This shift is strongly supported by academic research: a **2024 Journal of Marketing study** found that nano- and micro-influencers generate significantly higher revenue efficiency than macro or mega-influencers, due to stronger audience intimacy and higher engagement rates. The same study analysed 1.9 million product-linked influencer interactions and concluded that these smaller voices across industries consistently outperform larger ones in cost-effectiveness and conversion.

Harvard Business Review's 2024 analysis of 55,000 influencer posts found that content perceived as more authentic, typically produced by smaller influencers, receives the highest engagement across Instagram. This aligns with what we see in sport for example: influencers who show real training, real challenges, and real community moments outperform polished, aspirational content. Micro-influencers also offer access to the subcultures where identity is formed, like the five-a-side WhatsApp group, online gaming forum or local book club.

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Why micro-influencers are becoming more effective



The shift in audience trust

Audience trust has undergone a profound shift over the past few years, and this change sits at the heart of why micro-influencers have become so effective. Audiences no longer look to celebrities or polished brand spokespeople as their primary sources of truth. Instead, they gravitate toward people who feel familiar, relatable and culturally aligned with their own lives.

According to the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), people trust ‘someone like me’ more than CEOs, celebrities or public figures. This is a significant reversal of the traditional hierarchy of influence. For many years, brands assumed that authority flowed from the top down, from the most famous, most successful, or most institutionally powerful voices. However, today, trust flows laterally. It flows between peers, communities and influencers who feel like part of the same world as their audience.

As such, according to the [Nielsen 2024 Trust in Marketing Report](#), 88% of consumers trust recommendations from people they know or feel connected to. This is because people understand the common language, inside jokes, and frustrations of the subculture that they come from, and want to be communicated to on that level.

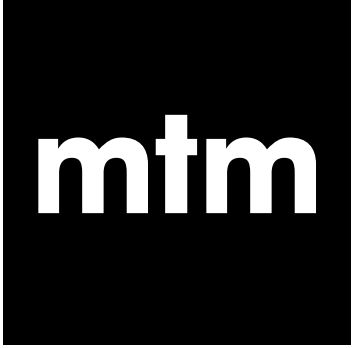
Engagement over reach

It’s easy to assume that ‘macro’ and ‘mega’ influencers deliver better results. On paper, a large following might suggest scale and visibility. In reality, this is not exactly the case.

Large audiences more often than not come with lower engagement rates, fake follower counts, and diluted targeting. In fact, engagement rates among micro-influencers (10K–50K followers) average 3.86%, compared to just 1.21% for macro-influencers on Instagram, according to [Influencer Marketing Hub’s 2024 Benchmark Report](#).

This engagement compounds over time as social platforms are backing the shift, prioritising content that keeps users interacting meaningfully. Watch time, saves, shares, and engagement rate are far more valuable signals than followers, passive impressions or reach.

If you take a look at smaller accounts you follow, chances are, you’ll notice a similar trend: micro influencers often have highly engaged audiences.



Content volume and authentic storytelling

Something we've all probably noticed is the difference in posting frequency between macro and micro influencers, with the latter **posting at a much higher rate**. This is because macro-influencers typically produce polished, infrequent content. Micro-influencers produce high-volume, high-frequency, narrative-driven content that builds long-term engagement.

This is very commercially beneficial as it creates:

- More touchpoints
- More opportunities for product integration
- More authentic storytelling
- More data to measure impact

This makes this type of partnership a very sensible and scalable investment for brands.

Cost-effectiveness and scalability

Because they cost less per activation, brands can work with 20–50 micro influencers instead of one macro or mega influencer, creating a network effect across multiple sporting subcultures.

This delivers:

- Broader reach across niche communities
- Higher aggregate engagement
- Lower cost per engagement
- More diverse content formats
- Better A/B testing opportunities
- Reduced risk (no single point of failure)

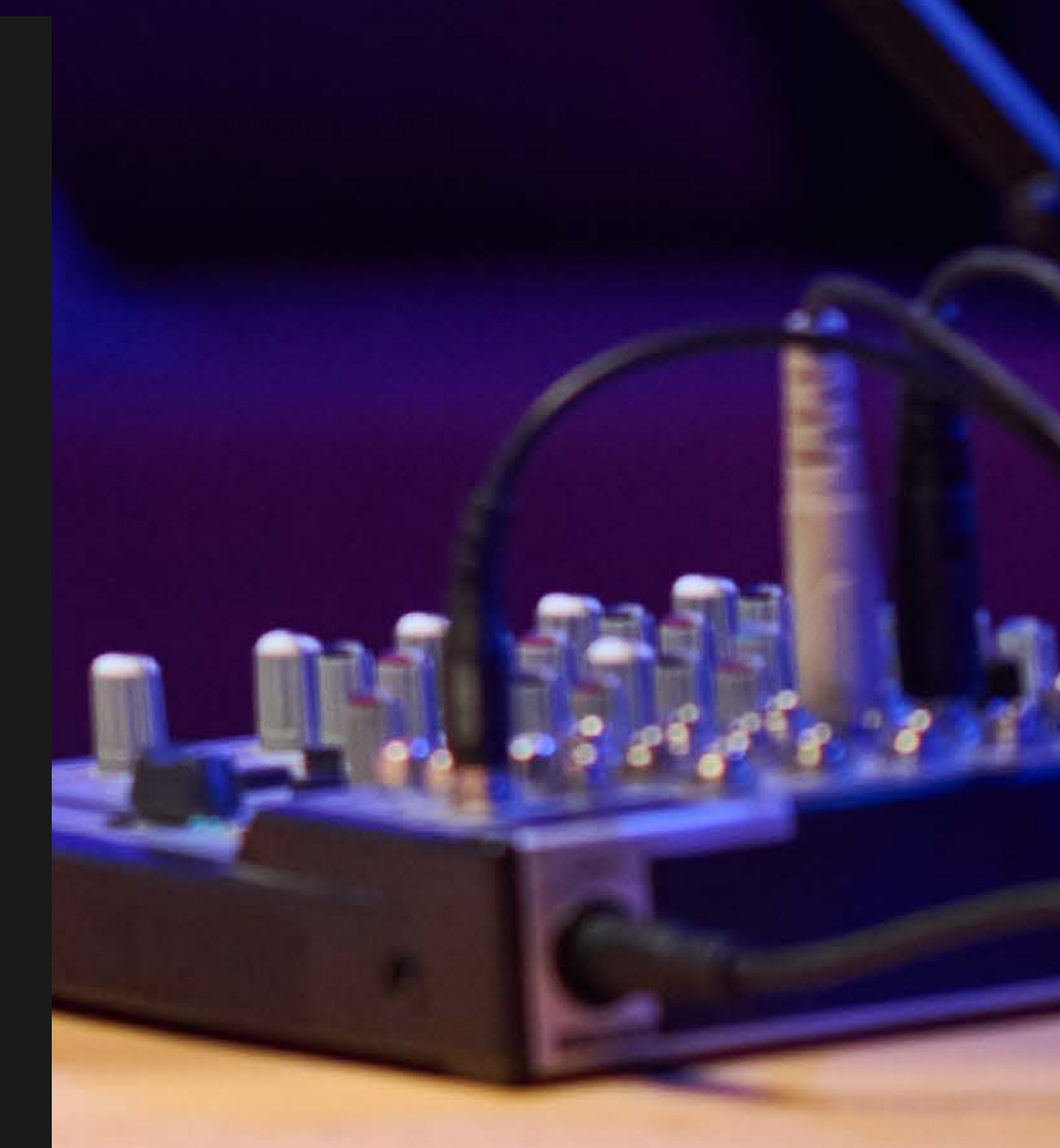
It was claimed in **Harvard Business Review** in October 2024 that micro-influencers deliver significantly higher revenue efficiency per dollar spent than macro-influencers.

How brands should structure their approach



The rise of micro-influencers has fundamentally changed how brands should structure their influencer strategies. The old model went something like this: identify a big name, negotiate a fee, push out a hero asset. Essentially, it was a one-off activation. This just doesn't achieve the cultural relevance or commercial impact required in 2026.

This section outlines how brands should approach influencer marketing nowadays. It covers the strategic foundations of a modern, credibility-led programme, from the initial mapping stage, right through to meaningful success measurement.

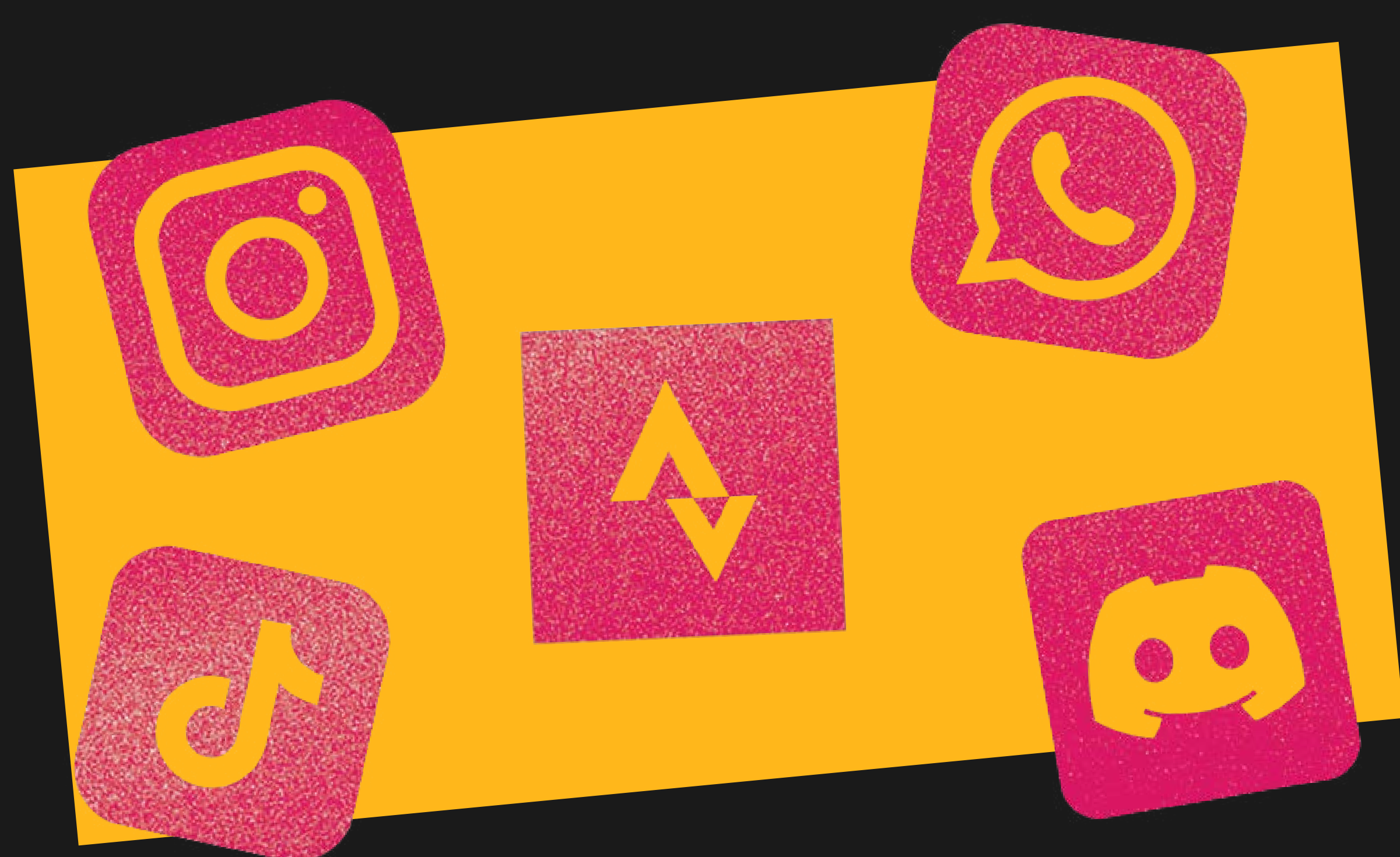


Creating an 'ecosystem' of collaborators

The name of the game in 2026 is to create an 'ecosystem' where you collaborate with influencers who know their audiences better than anyone, rather than using them as media channels.

For brands, this requires a shift in mindset. Instead of controlling every detail, it is often more effective to give them the space to do what they do best, shaping the narrative based on authentic experiences of your brand.

Social listening can further help brands leverage organic content that is already performing effectively, as well as discover emerging influencers who are building genuine connections with their audiences.



Mapping micro-communities

Every industry is a constellation of micro-communities. Even within a single discipline, there are dozens of subcultures, each with its own rituals, language, influencers and behaviours. Running, for example, has parkrun groups, marathoners, trail runners, ultra-runners, beginners and club athletes. Brands must map these micro-communities before they map the best influencers.

This means identifying:

- Where conversations happen (TikTok, Instagram, Strava, Discord, WhatsApp)
- Who the cultural leaders are (not always the biggest accounts)
- What the community values (humour, identity, belonging, aspiration)
- What the pain points are (cost, access, product flaws, over-saturation)
- How influence flows (friend-to-friend, club-to-member, influencer-to-community)
- This mapping exercise becomes the foundation for an influencer strategy.

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Building a tiered strategy

Even within the ‘micro-influencer’ label, there are many strata of influencer, based on follower count, engagement levels, and specific appeal. A modern influencer programme should be structured like a pyramid, effectively utilising the strengths of each partnership.

1 Anchor Influencers (20k–100k followers)

Brands that get the most return on investment from their event strategies nurture the contacts, insights, and content they gather during those days. High-value accounts are supported with the right mix of digital touchpoints, custom content, and experiences. Sales and marketing teams use a shared view from CRM. This view reveals who engaged, what topics they discussed, and which decision-makers participated.

Crucially, event-touched accounts are then tracked over time to understand how live experiences influence deal velocity, deal size and brand preference across the portfolio.

2 Community Influencers (5k–20k followers)

These deliver depth. They speak directly to niche audiences and drive behavioural change. They are often the most trusted voices in a subculture.

3 Hyper-Local & Nano Influencers (<5k followers)

These influence local purchase decisions. They are invaluable for regional activations, event promotion, and grassroots engagement. This is where the local appeal comes into play, where many purchase decisions, like event entries, attending brick-and-mortar stores, and live participation, are geographically contingent.

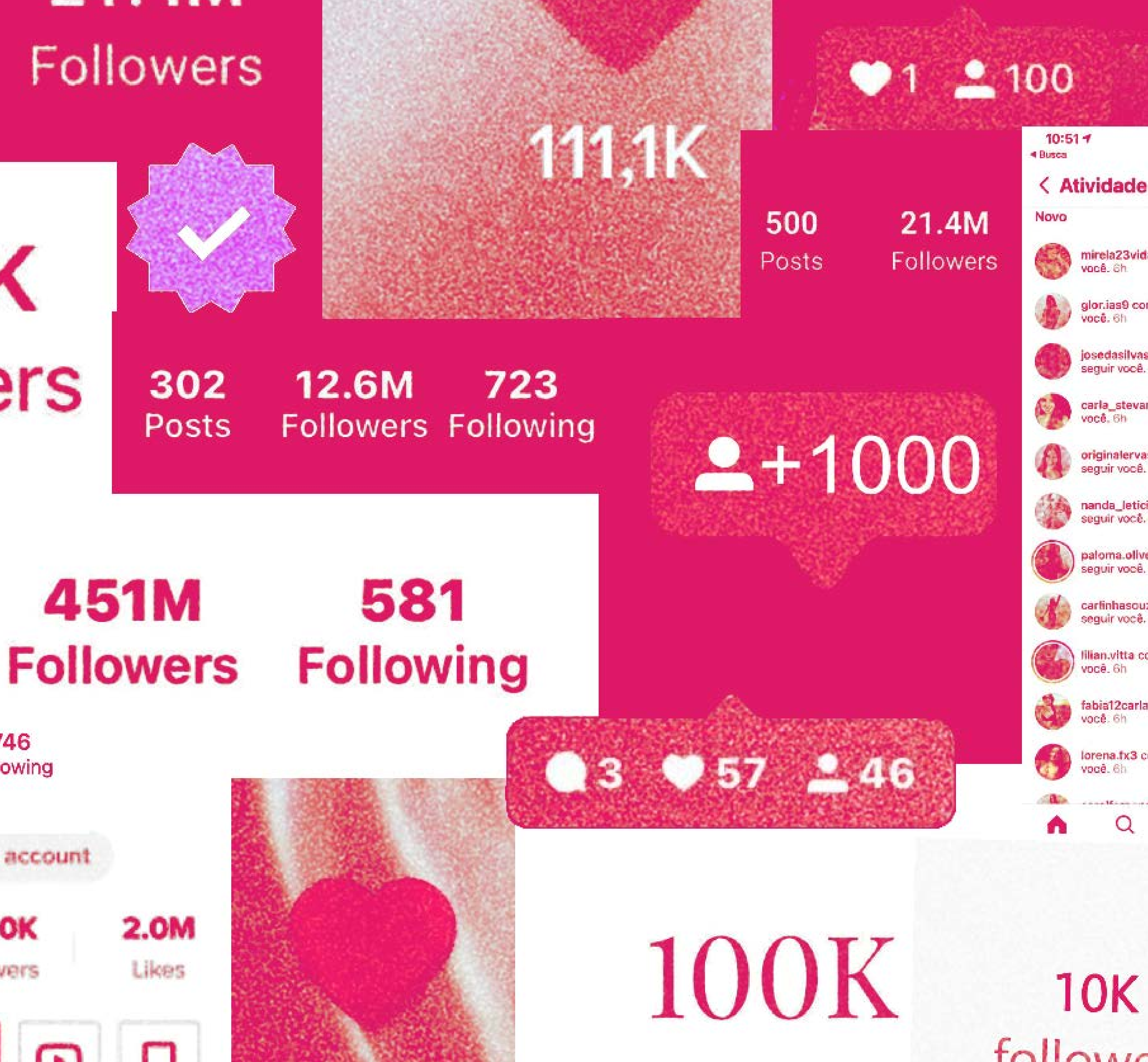
A tiered strategy allows brands to:

- Scale influence across multiple communities
- Reduce risk by diversifying investment
- Test messaging across different audience types
- Build a network effect rather than relying on one voice

This is the model used by many of the most successful consumer and community-driven brands today, from lifestyle and wellness labels to tech platforms and local grassroots initiatives across a range of sectors.



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Prioritising credibility over follower count

When exploring options for curator partnerships, how can we define credibility? And more importantly, how can we measure it?

A few suggestions:

- Audience relevance (does their audience match your target demographic/personas?)
- Engagement quality (are comments meaningful, or generic?)
- Content authenticity (do they show real challenges as well as success and aspirational content?)
- Cultural fluency (Do they speak the language of our target audience?)
- Consistency (Do they post regularly and with purpose?)



Co-creation and creative freedom

The most effective influencer campaigns are co-created, not dictated. As discussed above, micro-influencers know what resonates with their audience far better than any brand or agency. They understand the tone, humour, pacing, and authenticity required to make content land.

Being overly prescriptive with campaign guidelines, such as writing scripts, captions, or requiring a rigid format, kills the authenticity.

Whilst it is important to provide clear objectives, product education and some guardrails, over-engineering is a waste of their knowledge and skills.



Applying this influencer marketing in a B2B context

Influencer marketing is often still seen as a B2C tactic. Something built for lifestyle brands, consumer products, and mass market audiences.

But the same shift driving the rise of micro influencers in consumer marketing, trust, credibility, and cultural alignment, is equally, if not more, relevant in B2B.

In environments where decisions are higher value, higher risk, and more complex, influence does not come from scale. It comes from expertise, reputation, and peer validation.

Influence in B2B works differently

B2B audiences do not follow influencers in the same way as consumers. They are not engaging purely for entertainment or inspiration. They are looking for practical insight, professional credibility, and evidence of real-world application.

As a result, the definition of an influencer shifts.

In B2B, influence tends to sit with industry specialists, practitioners, consultants, and niche content creators operating on platforms like LinkedIn, YouTube, or Substack.

They may have smaller audiences, but those audiences are often highly relevant and closely aligned to commercial decision-making.

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Credibility is the currency

In B2C, aspiration can drive attention. In B2B, credibility drives action.

Decision-makers are far more sceptical of polished messaging or overt promotion. They look to people who have direct experience solving the problems they face, and who share nuanced insight rather than surface-level opinion.

This is where the core principles outlined throughout this guide become even more powerful. Authenticity matters more than production value, depth matters more than scale, and trust outweighs visibility.

The most effective B2B influencers do not feel like media channels. They feel like respected peers.



From campaigns to relationships

Short-term, campaign-led influencer activity is particularly ineffective in B2B.

Sales cycles are longer, trust builds slowly, and decisions involve multiple stakeholders. This makes one-off activations feel disconnected from the way real influence works.

The most effective B2B strategies are always on and relationship-led. They are built around sustained collaboration and ongoing contribution to a conversation, rather than a single moment in time.

This often includes co-creating insight-led content, involving influencers in product development or feedback, and activating them within events and industry moments. Over time, this builds familiarity and authority, which are the factors that ultimately influence high-value decisions.



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Measuring B2B influence

Traditional social metrics alone rarely capture the true impact of B2B influencer activity.

Instead, brands should focus on signals that reflect consideration and intent. This includes the quality of engagement, the depth of conversation, and the extent to which content is shared within relevant networks.

The objective is not just visibility. It is to influence perception, credibility, and decision-making within a clearly defined audience.





Developing always-on influencer ecosystems

The problem with campaigns is that they gather momentum, peak, and fall off the radar around a specific launch, season or event. This doesn't reflect the way that audiences interact with a brand or build loyalty.

There's also a common misconception that long-term, continued collaboration with the same influencer or creator can lose impact over time. In reality, the opposite is true, especially when the right partnerships are struck and a well-thought-out strategy is rolled out.

As they continue to work with a brand, the partnership will feel more natural and credible. The audience grows familiar with the relationship, and that familiarity builds trust. Instead of a one-off promotion, the content becomes an ongoing story, with the product's features and benefits woven seamlessly into the influencer's everyday content.

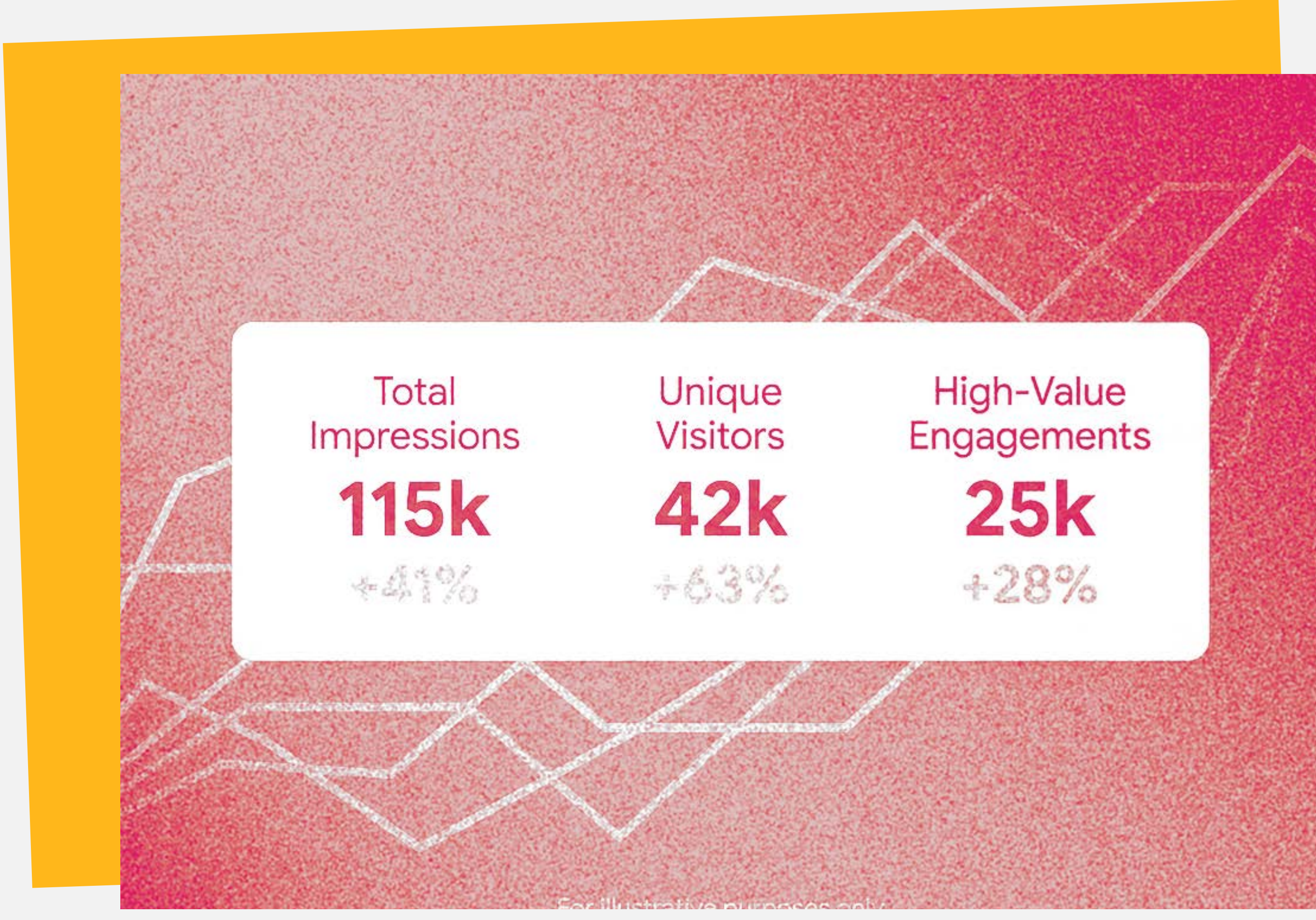
So why engage a micro for a limited-time campaign only to end the contact just as momentum is building?

In spaces where behaviour changes slowly and trust builds over time, always-on ecosystems are essential

An always-on programme includes:

- Long-term partnerships
- Seasonal campaigns across the year
- Community events and meet-ups
- Product development narratives - from early testing, to launch, to review

This approach mirrors how audiences engage with brands, which is continuously, not in bursts.



Total Impressions	Unique Visitors	High-Value Engagements
115k	42k	25k
+41%	+63%	+28%

Measuring what matters: credibility-led metrics

Metrics that prioritise reach over credibility, such as impressions, reach, and follower count, mean nothing if that audience is not engaged. Brands need to measure what actually drives behaviour.

Credibility-led metrics include:

- Engagement quality (are people asking questions and sharing experiences in the comments?)
- Saves and shares (indicators of real value)
- Comment sentiment (is it positive, neutral or negative?)
- Participation uplift (event attendance, joining newsletters, the brand growing their following)
- Conversion metrics (UTMs, promo codes, tracked links)
- Content longevity (does the content continue to perform over time?)

The most advanced brands also track:

- Influencer-driven product reviews
- Influencer-led search uplift
- Influencer-influenced brand sentiment

These are the metrics that prioritise commercial impact, rather than focusing purely on awareness.




Conclusion: Key takeaways for marketers

The evidence throughout this guide points to a clear set of principles:

1 **Trust now flows horizontally, not vertically**

Audiences now trust “people like me” more than CEOs, celebrities, or elite athletes. Micro-influencers sit closest to this trust dynamic, making them uniquely powerful in shaping behaviour.

2 **Authenticity beats aspiration**

Lower-production, real-world content consistently outperforms polished brand assets. Micro-influencers thrive here because their lives look like the lives of the people they influence.

3 **Micro-influencers deliver stronger engagement and better value**

Industry benchmarks show that influencers in the 10K-100K range drive significantly higher engagement than macro-influencers, making the investment more cost-effective.

4 **Long-term partnerships outperform one-off activations**

Gymshark’s rise shows what happens when brands invest early, build trust, and grow with influencers. Sustainable influence comes from gradually impacting behaviours, and that can only be achieved over a sustained period.

The influencer landscape in sport has shifted decisively, changing the way that trust, influence, and cultural relevance work.

5 **Co-creating is better than distribution**

The most successful brands treat influencers as co-architects of product, community, and culture. This means involving them in feedback loops, product development, and storytelling. They also know how to speak to their audience better than any brand or agency. Let them communicate in their way.

6 **Cultural fluency is now a competitive advantage**

Micro-influencers keep brands close to the grassroots of communities who use their products or services.

7 **The future belongs to brands that build ecosystems**

Always-on influencer networks out perform seasonal bursts. They generate more content, more trust, and more consistent influence across the whole year.

Long-term partnerships outperform one-off activations

Gymshark’s rise shows what happens when brands invest early, build trust, and grow with influencers. Sustainable influence comes from gradually impacting behaviours, and that can only be achieved over a sustained period.

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More relevant thinking from the MTM team

Explore more perspectives from across MTM on how changing audience behaviour, platform dynamics, online communities and digital trust are reshaping modern influencer marketing strategies.



Faber Whitehouse Senior Social Media Manager

Faber Whitehouse explores why trust has become one of the most important performance indicators for brands looking to build stronger, longer lasting connections online in an increasingly AI influenced social landscape.

[Read more](#)



Hollie Mansell Senior Social Media Manager

Hollie Mansell explores how influencer marketing is evolving beyond reach and follower counts, and why authenticity, audience relevance and genuine alignment are now driving more meaningful engagement and stronger long term results for brands.

[Read more](#)



Chloe Buchanan Head of PR and Social Media

Chloe Buchanan explores why Reddit is becoming increasingly influential in shaping brand perception in an AI mediated internet and what marketers need to understand about online communities, credibility and AI driven discovery as audiences change the way they evaluate and validate brands online.

[Read more](#)

How can MTM help?

If you're questioning whether your influencer marketing is truly delivering impact in an increasingly crowded digital landscape, it often signals that deeper strategic work is needed.

Many brands struggle because their creator and influencer partnerships, content approach or campaign strategy aren't fully aligned with their audience, objectives or commercial goals.

MTM is an influencer marketing agency that helps brands identify, engage and activate the right creators and influencers to deliver meaningful business outcomes.

Get in contact with our team to explore how we can help you build a distinctive, credible and commercially effective influencer strategy that cuts through the noise.

“It's a very creative and effective agency. They want the best for their clients and they are really flexible.”

Judith Metschies
Head of Marketing, Airbus
(MTM client for nine years)



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