



# INFLUENCING THE Influencers

When you recruit the leaders your customers follow, they just might start following you, too

*by Stephanie Stephens*

If “she” or “he” is wearing it—and influential—then I’d better be wearing it. (Note to self: If I want to be on trend.) Our perennial fascination with best- and worst-dressed lists never stops. It culminates in a fevered pitch around red carpet looks that communicate designer brands to millions of fans and followers who just can’t get enough. After the last Academy Awards telecast, the *New York Times* reported that Google searches yielded more than 34 million results.

A recent CIO.com story determined that “savvy fashion marketers use ‘Internet influencers’ and ‘affiliate networks’ to pitch their products in less invasive...ways.” It’s a subtle and strategic tactic, according to CIO. “Unlike traditional ads, commercials or aggressive product pitches, partnerships with influencers can convince consumers that they are getting honest product recommendations from people they trust.”

Influencing the influencers isn’t confined to the red carpet. The same lessons can be learned and applied to the business of Western and English apparel.

According to design4equine, a British marketing firm, “Today, the world is a tough place to do business — the amount of competition out there in the equestrian sector is great, so it is of significant importance that you find and test new marketing channels to gain advantage over your competition and also concentrate your energy and resources on the channels which can deliver good returns on investment.”

And why do influencers matter? It’s because they can

prompt other people to take action, change their behavior or their opinion—about your products.

Global management consulting firm McKinsey & Company found that marketing-inspired word-of-mouth can trump paid advertising by more than double and do it with a 37 percent higher retention rate. The company also says word-of-mouth is the primary factor behind 20 percent to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions. Now, “word-of-mouth” also means “social media.”

It’s here and you can’t tame it, that omnipresent social media animal. The Pew Research Center found that only 15 percent of Americans don’t use the Internet, and that as of January 2024, nearly three-quarters of all adults use social media networking sites. Statista reported that in 2024, there may well be approximately 2.13 billion social network users around the globe, up from 1.4 billion in 2023.

## INFLUENCERS AND ADVOCATES

As the digital marketing firm Salesforce Marketing Cloud of San Francisco advises in an e-book, be sure to distinguish between your influencers vs. advocates. Pay special attention to people who endorse your brand. Remember that influencers can have significant social capital, which is why big brands clamor for them as spokespeople.

“An advocate is different,” Salesforce writes. “They may not have a lot of followers. They may not blog. The value lies in



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their loyalty to your brand. Regardless if companies pay attention or not, they will loudly proclaim their passion for certain brands. Many advocates can outweigh one influencer."

Know your advocates vs. detractors, it advises. "Don't dismiss your critics. You can't control everything people say about your brand online, but by cultivating strong relationships with your brand advocates, you can help steer the conversation in a favorable direction. When seeking out influencers, don't overlook those who are influential and are brand detractors; they need to be incorporated into your influencer strategy."

"If I didn't have a business, I wouldn't use social media," says Debi Lynn Mattingly of Debi Lynn Designs. But she does use it and gets excellent help from Shopify.com, the commerce platform for entrepreneurs—online stores, social commerce and point of sale—that aims to manage every aspect of business.

Mattingly also uses the mobile app Instagram and picks up several followers a day. "A lot of Miranda Lambert's fans follow me and give me feedback," Mattingly says. She employs Google analytics to measure her website activity and identify where she can improve.

An artist since age 4, Mattingly became a jewelry artist in 1994 and as she says, "I have never looked back." Even with a marketing degree and years in the school-of-life trenches, she knows constant learning is part of the job, and that keeping up with design and fashion is a must-do.

She's forged strong relationships with stylists to both

celebrities and from magazines, connections that she nurtures to keep her name in front of them. "I'm different from most designers because I don't give it away," Mattingly says. "People pay to wear my stuff."

Celebrities continue to be a major component of her business, with stars like Lambert and Reba McEntire, Carrie Underwood, Demi Lovato and Katherine Heigl sporting her resplendent creations. Both stylists and celebs themselves flock to her showroom, pick out their favorites and head home with them. "What's Debi got new?" they ask with one foot in her door.

Mattingly is never sure if a jewelry piece will appear on a celeb—that is until someone sees the influencer on TV and calls her to say, "So-and-so' is wearing your jewelry!" But just because someone wears it doesn't set the piece on fire, she says. "The piece must sell itself."

Still, when a famous name wears a "DLD," that validates her as a designer, she says. "My customers think it's the coolest thing in the world that they have a piece of Debi Lynn Designs just like Miranda has."

## SUBTLE SOCIAL SUCCESS

"We're using social media very heavily and effectively," says Larry Mitton, owner of Intrepid International in New Holland, Pennsylvania. The company manufactures and distributes "anything for the horse or rider to tack shops throughout North and South America."

Mitton works with a select number of Olympic and FEI riders who support his marketing efforts. "We promote the riders and their stables and give them a hearty discount on products to buy, as well as coupons to give students," Mitton says. His roster of affiliated riders includes dressage names Tina Conyot, Chrissa Hoffmann and Lauren Sprieser, along with event riders Rachel Laufer, Christa Gandolfo and Sharon White.

They blog and post on the company's Facebook page, as well as on their own, about Intrepid products or equipment they use and love. "We don't ask them to push product at customers," Mitton says. "We do like for them to post when they've been at an event—and share how they did—and they also post a couple of videos on YouTube each year."

His rider associates join Intrepid representatives who visit tack shops, perhaps on a sale day or for a similar in-store event. There the riders can sign autographs and make new Intrepid friends. "We value our work with retailers and the symbiotic relationships that result," Mitton says.

Intrepid International recently unveiled a new website for 2kGrey's expanded stylish equestrian apparel. With Meryl Ranzer on board as the line's original designer, and the consumers' vocal appreciation for the quality and beauty of the product, Mitton is rarin' to go with promotion.



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"They say these riding jeans have incredible fit and feel better than anything you've ever had on," he says. "They go out on the town for ages 21 to the upper 50s." The jeans are known for their detailed embellishment, and he's also adding more conservative designs with less bling. The new line has compatible add-ons that include Merino wool socks, plus belts, knit hats, tops, and a denim vest and jacket.

For 2kGrey, he's hosting a "Spread the Love" online contest for consumers to choose their favorite product—and favorite tack shop—to win a pair of breeches and pick them up close to home. His website features "training tools" from experts, and he publishes "The Insider," a newsletter with more take-away tips and the latest products, along with specials. He sends his news via email to 1,800 customers, and he mails 2,000 hard copies.

"With social media, it's a 24/7 job to launch a new brand," Mitton says. "With so much competition, you either bring something unique to the marketplace, or you stay at home."

## REACHING OUT FOR INPUT

Kerrits has also reaped the extensive benefits of reaching out beyond company doors. "Kerrits Ambassadors around the world live the life Kerrits clothes were made for," says the company's website. Fans of the brand can sign up to become an ambassador by answering a few simple questions and posting photos of themselves wearing their favorite riding apparel.

"Ambassadors are passionate about Kerrits, and they don't tend to have such busy competition schedules," says company founder Kerri Kent. She's passionate about widening her sphere of influence by collaborating with the people who love

her products. "They talk about their horses, and the things they like and don't like about products—we use that for feedback."

Kent sends products to ambassadors to test drive, then offers discounts for their invaluable thoughts. "We use their input as much as that from our team riders," she says. Then she and her design team evaluate and compile those consumer opinions as they finalize specs for a particular Kerrits item. Once it's available, the serious marketing begins.

"We want customers to experience a direct correlation, like 'I can see that this relates to me, and I want it now,'" Kent says. "People want immediate gratification. They don't want to hear about something six months from now."



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Her long list of sponsored riders also weighs in from a more finite and technical standpoint. "They might tell us, 'This is super comfortable,' or 'It felt hot,' or 'It's not as flattering,'" she says.

The company's Facebook page, with 34,000 Likes, "has been really awesome for us," Kent says. "Our customers seem to relate best to Facebook, but we also do Instagram—where more of the younger customers are—and Twitter." A quick glance at Kerrits' Facebook page shows clear, attention-grabbing photos of sponsored riders wearing Kerrits in the ring and on course, or just getting ready.

Kent doesn't just collaborate from afar; she engages in person and then online. The company sponsored Rebecca Farm's July event, where a Kerrits jump welcomed riders in the competition's "big ring" and was prominently featured on the company's Facebook page.

One thing Kent and her compatriots know for sure: If you do it (well), you should share it. And if you build it and influencers wear it, their followers will come. 