



THE NEXT WAVE OF INFLUENCE

AI Influencers, Employee Advocates

and the Post-follower Era

A CHANGING INFLUENCER LANDSCAPE

Influencer marketing is no longer an experimental tactic. It's become a sophisticated, highly funded GTM framework. But as investments surge, so does the pressure from leadership to demonstrate ROI.

Behind the influencer marketing frenzy lies a problem: wasted ad-spend driven by a fundamental misalignment between brands and creators. Amid a rise in algorithmic content that affects creator discovery, we are also seeing a rise in alternative influencer types, including AI influencers and employee-generated content. Both of these have begun to cement themselves in ways that brands should note for their strategies now and in the future.

Traditional, audience-first sourcing methods are failing. This report uncovers why the old playbook is broken and provides a data-driven framework to help you move past those metrics, synchronize your sourcing with actual consumer behavior and preferences, and ensure every partnership delivers value.

INFLUENCER BUDGETS ARE BIGGER, BUT SO ARE THE EXPECTATIONS

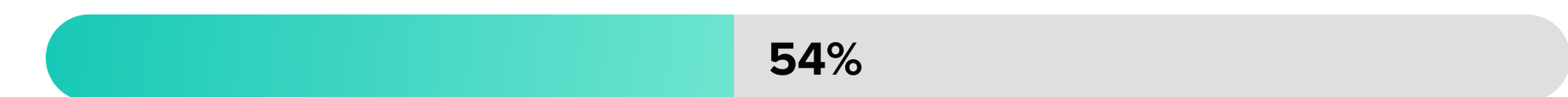
If there's one big takeaway from this research, it's that influencer marketing budgets are going up, even at a time when the marketing department is generally facing shrinking or static budgets.

More than 75% of marketers say their influencer marketing budgets have increased compared to the previous year.

It indicates a realignment is happening as influencer marketing becomes even more mainstream amid crowded social feeds, though that is also creating bigger expectations for it to deliver clear and measurable ROI.

Change in influencer marketing budget vs. the previous year

1-10% increase



11% or more increase



Stayed the same



1-10% decrease



11% or more decrease

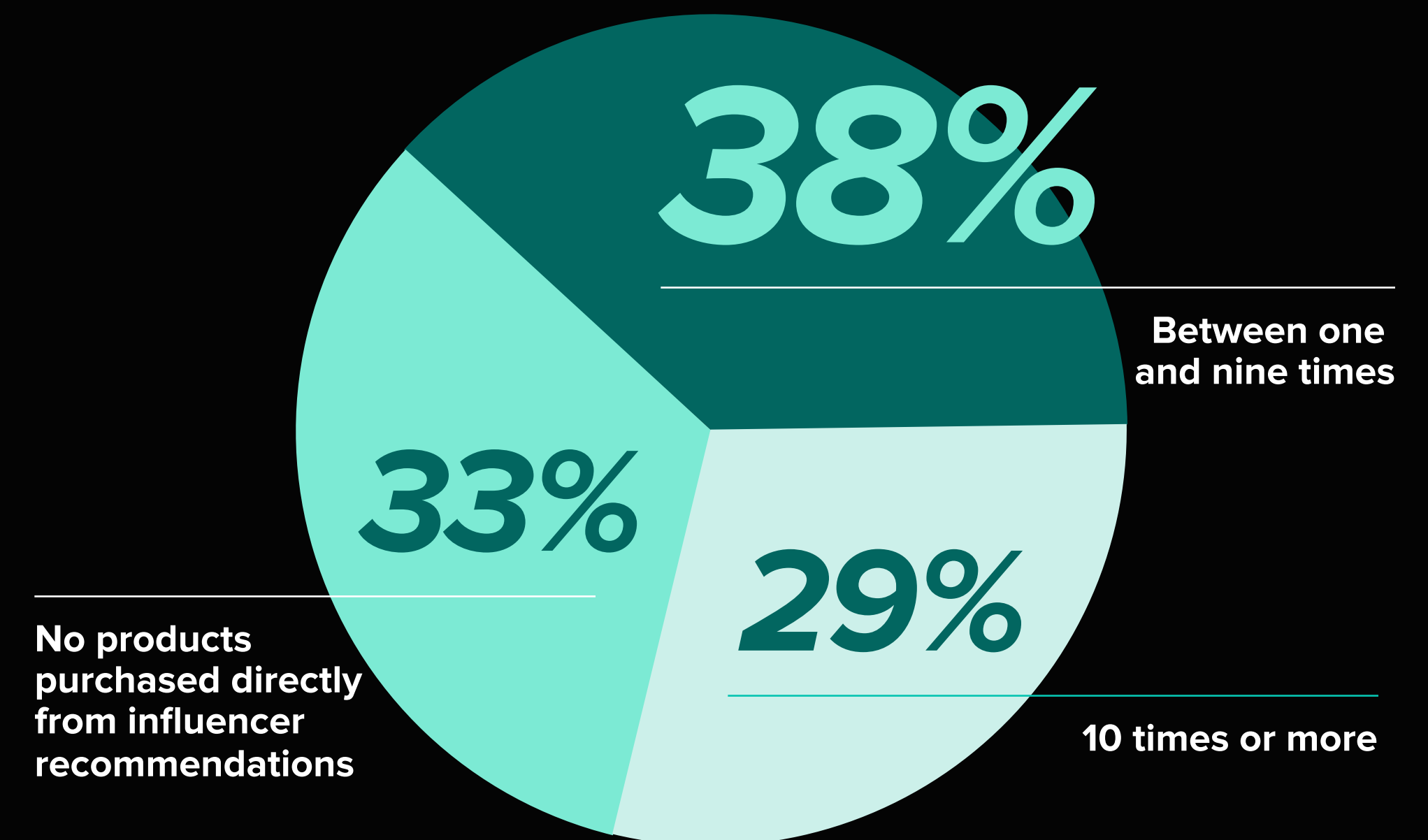


Consumers treat influencers as a crucial validation layer before purchase

This shift isn't random. It's borne out by a consistent pattern of buyer behavior. For consumers, influencers are now a key part of the buyer journey, even right up to the decision phase. Two-thirds of consumers have made a purchase decision directly based on an influencer's recommendations in the last year, with almost a third doing so 10 times or more.

That number grows even higher for younger generations with 81% of Gen Z making at least one purchase in the last year. Influencer marketing serves as a bottom-of-funnel decision driver, especially for the most-online generations.

Frequency of product purchase directly based on influencer recommendation in the last year



But marketers still treat influencers mostly as a brand awareness play

Despite this, many marketers still see influencer marketing as a top-of-funnel tactic. Half selected brand awareness as one of the top three reasons it's used, followed by brand trust (46%).

In contrast, conversion was much lower on the list of goals, with under a quarter listing it as a top priority.

Primary reasons for using influencer marketing



Top influencer marketing challenges

Finding creators who align with our target audience



Finding creators who align with our brand values



Measuring ROI



Disclosure and compliance guidelines



Benchmarking performance against competitors



Product logistics



Administrative hurdles



Issuing payments



Fragmented workflows



Source: Survey of Marketers

To unlock influencer marketing’s true potential, marketers must prove ROI

Marketing leaders no longer need to be convinced of the value of influencer marketing as a tactic. They can see it working in the market, and know that influencer marketing is a sophisticated GTM framework that requires investment and extensive collaboration.

But there is still a disconnect between what leaders want and current expectations for influencer marketing, especially as influencers extend beyond B2C and move into more complex deal cycles.

For budgets to get even bigger, that expectation gap needs to be closed and goals need to align. Marketers that want a bigger budget need to be able to demonstrate ROI more effectively, while leaders need to be realistic about the strategy and tactics behind influencer marketing in the first place.

33%

said evidence of ROI would likely trigger a significant increase in influencer marketing budget.

PRO TIP

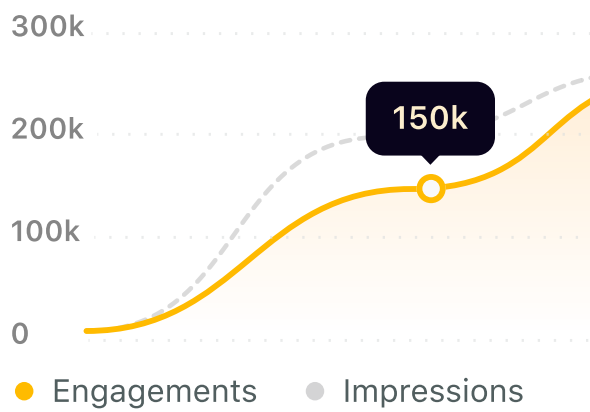
Prioritize proving clear ROI to expand your influencer budget:

While budgets are increasing, demonstrating clear ROI remains the primary gatekeeper to unlocking even larger allocations. Focus your tracking capabilities on bottom-of-funnel results, as 33% of social teams indicate that concrete evidence of ROI is the factor most likely to trigger a significant budget increase.

Campaign Budget

\$47,425 / \$50,000

Performance



Platform	Growth Rate
Instagram	14.7%



FOLLOWER COUNT IS OUT, CONTENT IS IN

As complexity increases, the challenge of finding influencers that can provide that return on investment increases.

The industry is moving away from using high follower counts to predict performance. And large influencers with big followings inevitably charge more money, making ROI all the more difficult if the campaign doesn't land right.

Many brands are now prioritizing influencers' content and engaged communities when selecting partners, and network trends and audience preferences support this shift.

The public doesn't care how many followers influencers have

Consumers aren't checking how many followers a creator has before deciding whether to follow or engage with that content themselves. It was only a factor for 17% of consumers.

Far more influential are the subjects that creators discuss in their social media content, the brands they choose to partner with and the quality of their most recent posts. More people are clicking through to research further when they come across content of interest than paying attention to the follower number.

Factors when deciding to follow a creator

- 1 The subjects they discuss in their social media content (47%)**
- 2 The brands or companies that they partner with (29%)**
- 3 Their most recent posts (29%)**
- 4 Their follower count (17%)**

Niche influencers have an edge when it comes to product recommendations

This indifference toward follower count also extends to actual purchase decisions. Consumers reported either no difference in their likelihood to purchase something based on the size of the creator’s audience (33%), or a slight preference toward recommendations from smaller, more niche influencers (21% vs. 15%).

This again shows the power of community trust, and smaller influencers often have highly engaged communities that genuinely pay attention to the recommendations that emerge from the creator’s posts.

Likelihood to buy based on a recommendation from

Either a niche or large influencer



Niche influencer



Large influencer



Follower count is no longer an easy win for influencer identification

Through extensive analysis of reach on Instagram, we found that for Reels and posts, more than 50% of creators have audiences where 70%+ of viewers were non-followers. The exception was Stories, which are designed specifically for followers and saw just 10% of creators had more views from non-followers.

It's a similar story on TikTok, according to the network's [explanation](#) of how it surfaces content. Following an account is one factor that goes into deciding what the algorithm shows you, but it's far from the determining factor.

If you're trying to prove ROI, brands focused on audience size and demographics are likely to be missing substantial portions of their target market. Content topic, quality, style and relevance have become much more important metrics for discovery. And the public agrees.

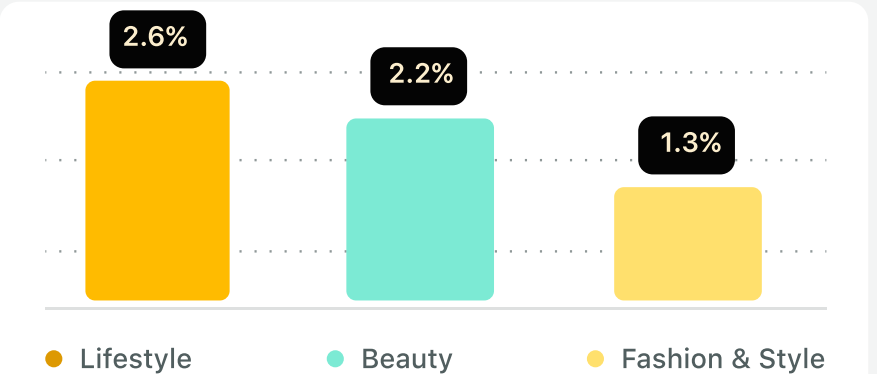
Number of creators who have audiences where 70%+ of viewers are non-followers

1 Reels (60%)

2 Posts (50%)

3 Stories (10%)

Engagement Rate by Influencer Category



PRO TIP

Shift creator discovery away from metrics like follower counts or demographics:

Modern algorithmic feeds decouple follower counts from actual distribution, prioritizing content style, relevance and topical alignment instead. When vetting creator partners, evaluate the subjects they discuss and the quality of their recent posts, as few consumers check an influencer's follower count before deciding to follow themselves.

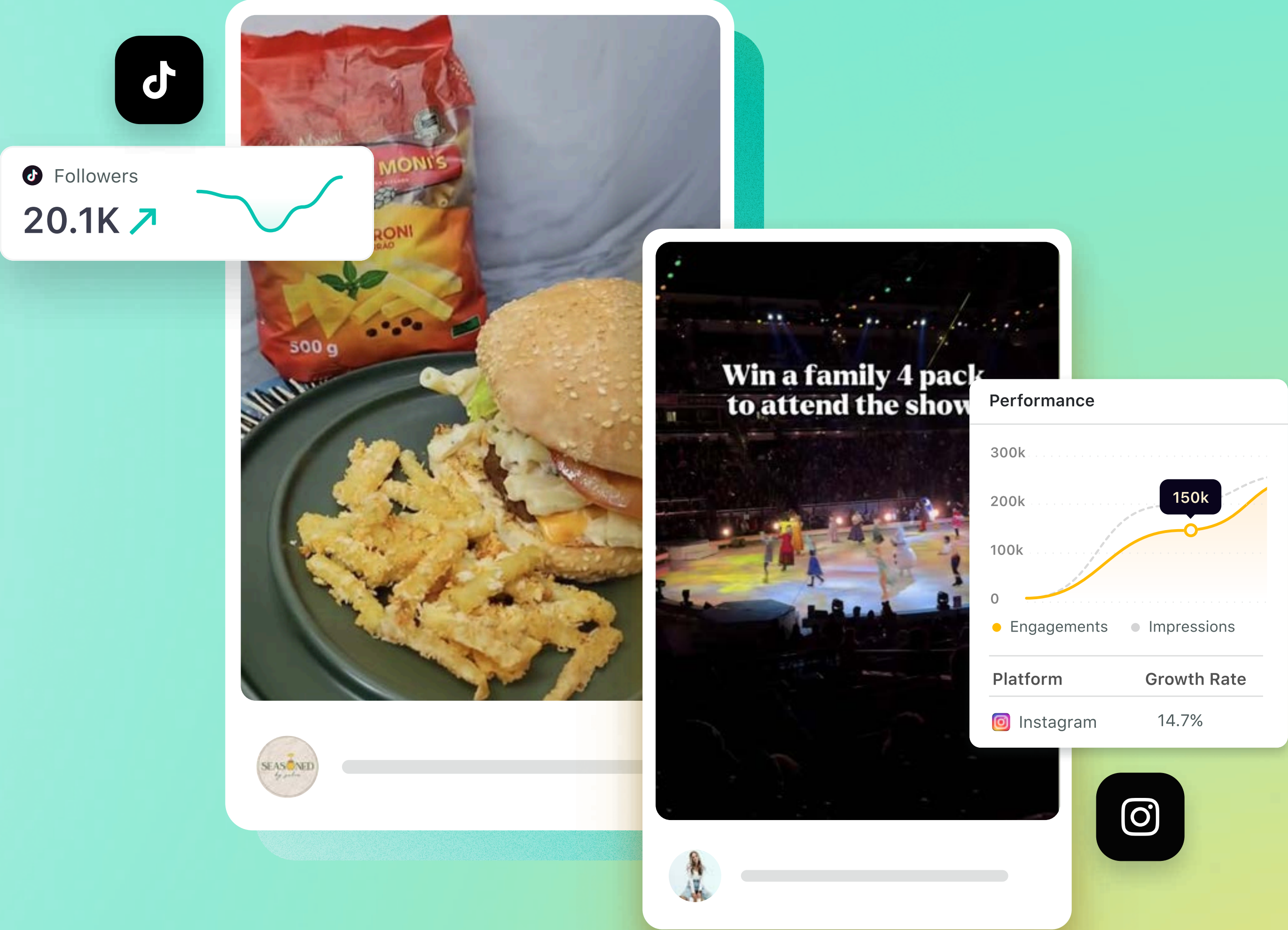


Joey Reyes

Smaller influencers drive high engagement

Niche influencers like the examples here show the engagement numbers behind this. TikTok is a platform where influencers often have millions of followers, but influencers such as Seasoned by Zahra have had successful partnerships with brands with just 20k followers, driving an engagement rate of 9% on this sponsored post.

And it's not just TikTok. Indiana influencer Taylor Yeskie partnered with Disney on Ice for a local competition to give away tickets via Instagram, driving an engagement rate of 8% on her 25k followers.



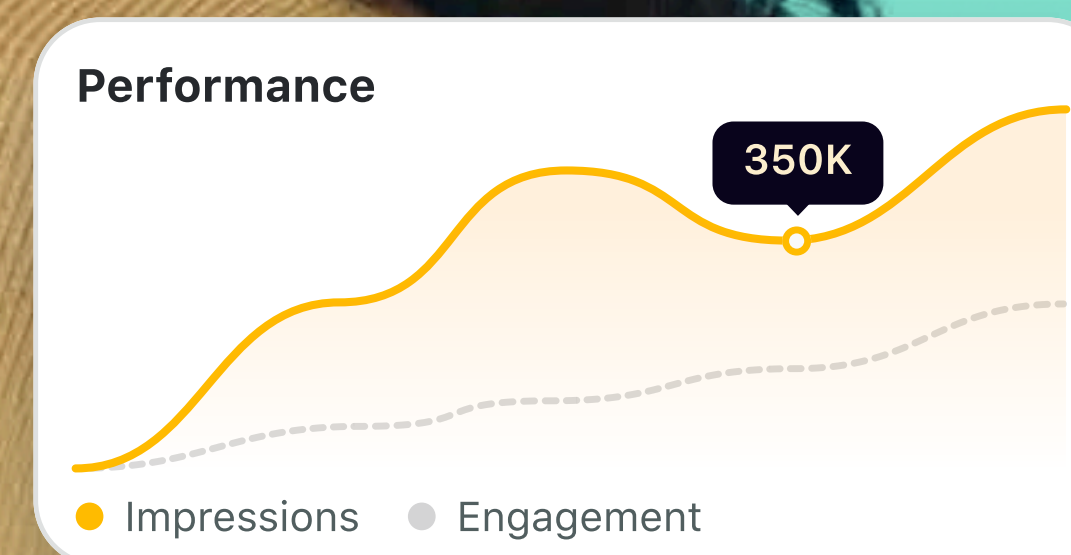
PARTNER WITH

SMALLER, NICHE CREATORS

PRO TIP

Partner with smaller, niche creators:

Smaller niche influencers hold a distinct competitive edge over mega-celebrities for driving purchasing behavior. Leverage micro- and nano-influencers to cultivate deeper trust, particularly when targeting Gen Z audiences who demonstrate a preference for tight-knit, highly engaged communities.



↗ TOP 5%

INFLUENCER CONTENT IS EVOLVING

What influencer marketing means is changing. There has long been a split between mega-influencers and niche influencers, but whole new categories are emerging. Employee-generated content is taking center stage for many brands, and even AI influencers are beginning to proliferate.

The public is skeptical of this rise in AI creators, and especially the prospect that brands might partner with them. But even being able to identify when AI content is being deployed may be a stretch, especially as the technology advances.

So here are some of the emerging conversations on where the influencer space is heading and where that falls within the spectrum of public opinion.

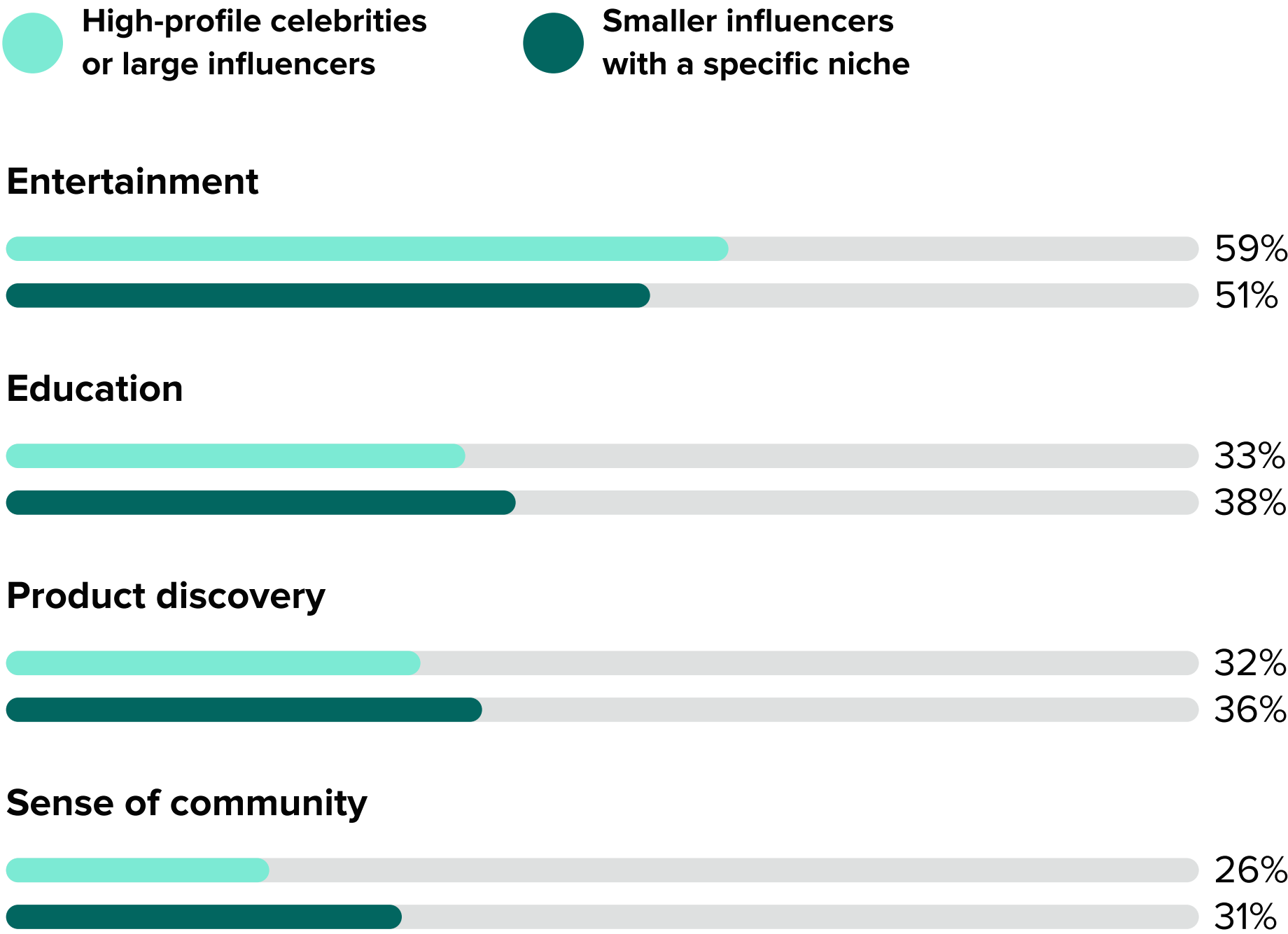


Influencers offer entertainment and more

The primary reason for following large and small influencers is entertainment, but there’s a subtle difference between the two. Consumers are less likely to follow niche influencers for entertainment, and more likely to do it for educational purposes, product discovery and community.

This hints at diverging paths for mega influencers compared to those producing more niche content, as the former broadcasts to their audience while the latter is more community driven.

Primary reasons for following



Here's a playbook
you can use for each.

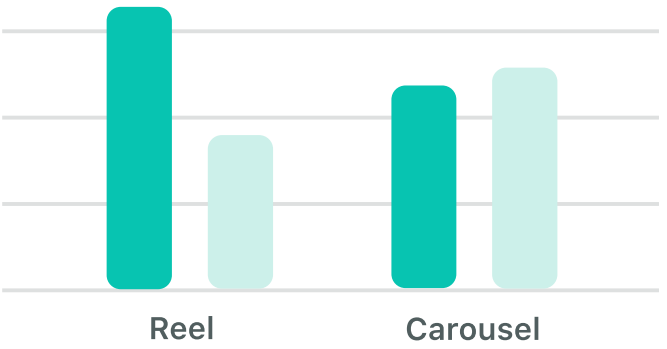
MEGA INFLUENCERS

Use mega influencers strictly for top-of-funnel brand awareness and broad reach.

Think of these partnerships like traditional broadcast media. Do not force them into deep product education or community-building. Instead, co-create entertaining, high-production or culturally relevant content designed to get maximum eyes on the brand.

↗ TOP 5%

EMV by Content Type

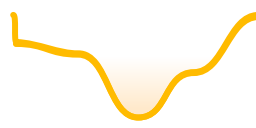


Sum of Shares

4.3K ↗ 3.2K

Instagram Likes

4.8K ↗



NICHE INFLUENCERS

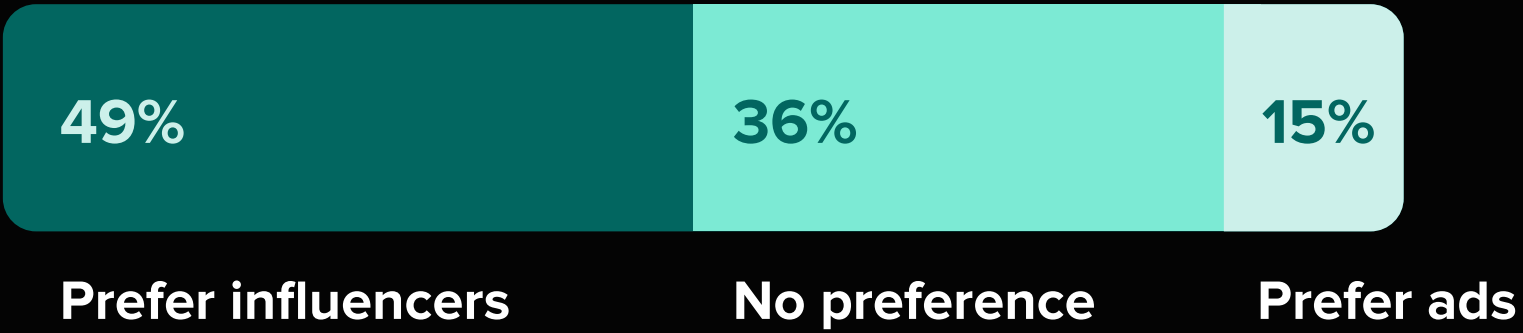
Use small/niche influencers for conversion, product consideration and community trust.

Shift budgets here when launching more complex products that require explanation or when trying to break into specific subcultures. Prioritize content formats like tutorials, unfiltered reviews and interactive Q&As. Brands should lean into the influencer's community by allowing them to speak in their own voice, rather than enforcing rigid brand scripts.

***Gen Z has a strong preference
for influencers over traditional ads***

While the general population did not indicate a preference either way between traditional digital advertising and influencer-driven ads, that was not at all the case for Gen Z. Among the younger generation, 49% preferred influencers to traditional ads, with only 15% favoring ads.

**Gen Z opinion on influencers
vs. traditional ads**

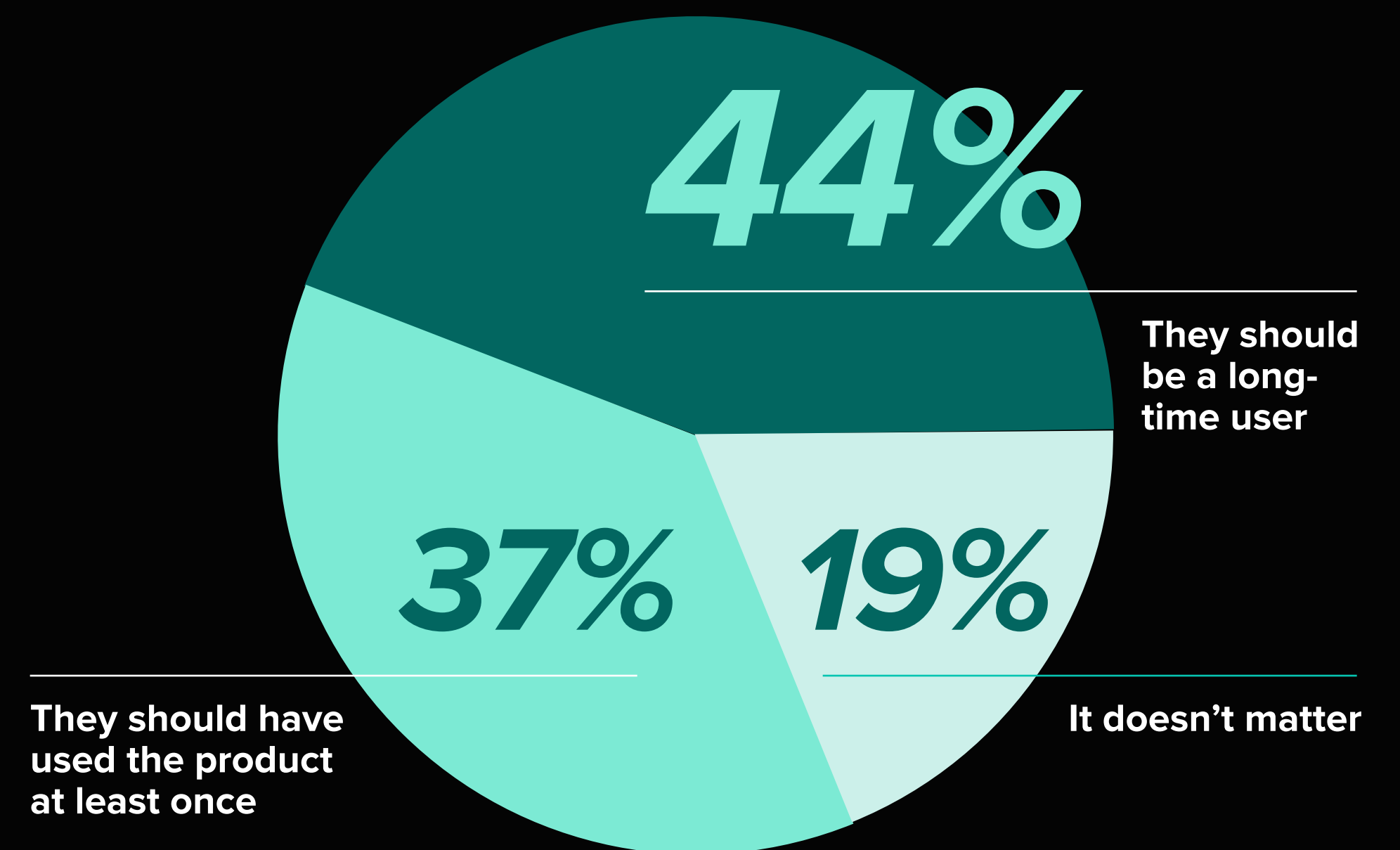


Influencers should use the products they're promoting, ideally for a long time

Consumers want an opinion they can trust, and that means they want real experiences, even from influencers. More than 80% of consumers want influencers to have actually used the product they're promoting.

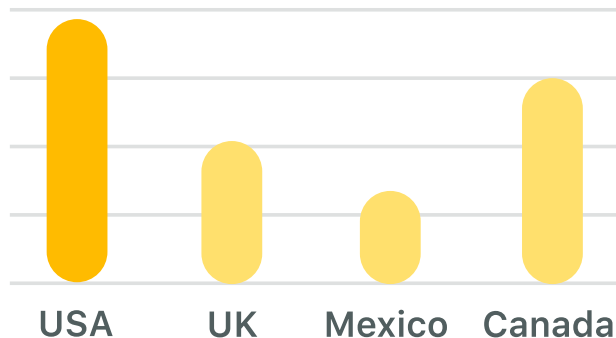
This shows the advantage of long-term creator partnerships with influencers. Not only does it build a strong working relationship between the two parties, it also builds trust with the audience who are more likely to see the product or service being promoted as genuinely useful.

Should an influencer have personally used a product before promoting it?



ESTABLISH LONG-TERM CREATOR PARTNERSHIPS

Top Countries



PRO TIP

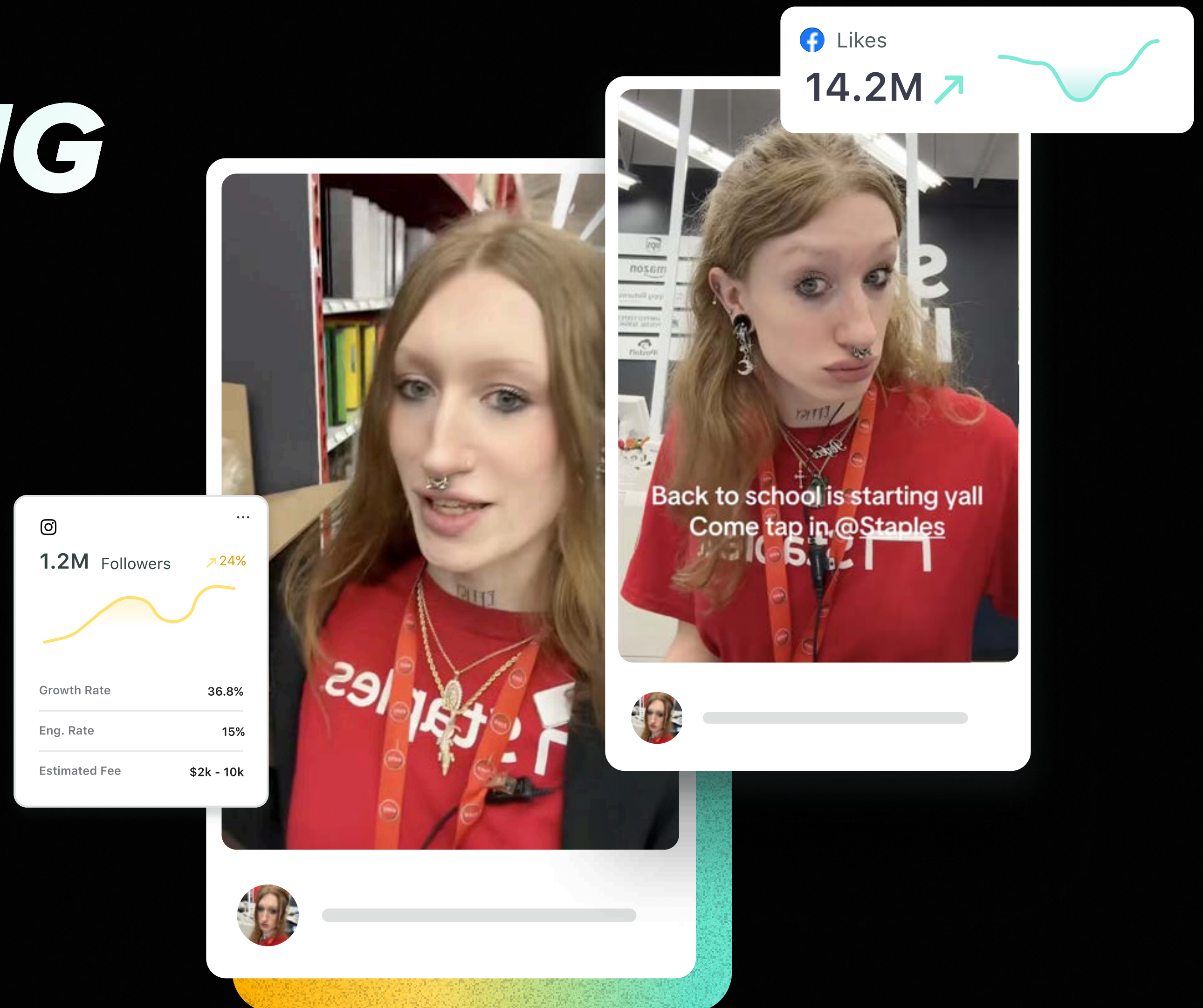
Establish long-term creator partnerships rather than transactional, one-off campaigns:

Most consumers expect an influencer to have personally used a product before promoting it, emphasizing the clear operational advantage of sustained relationships over one-off deals. Retaining the same creators over time provides verifiable product usage and establishes the authentic community trust that modern buyers demand.

THE EMERGING CLASS OF EMPLOYEE INFLUENCERS

There's a new trend in the influencer space, and it's employees posting to promote or represent the brands that employ them. A prominent example is the Staples Baddie, who went viral multiple times showing off her employer's products and services.

Sometimes these are formalized programs, while sometimes the employees begin posting under their own steam, but it's a growing trend for brands to be aware of. And the public has opinions about how programs should be run, from which employees they want to hear from to whether they should be paid extra for their trouble.

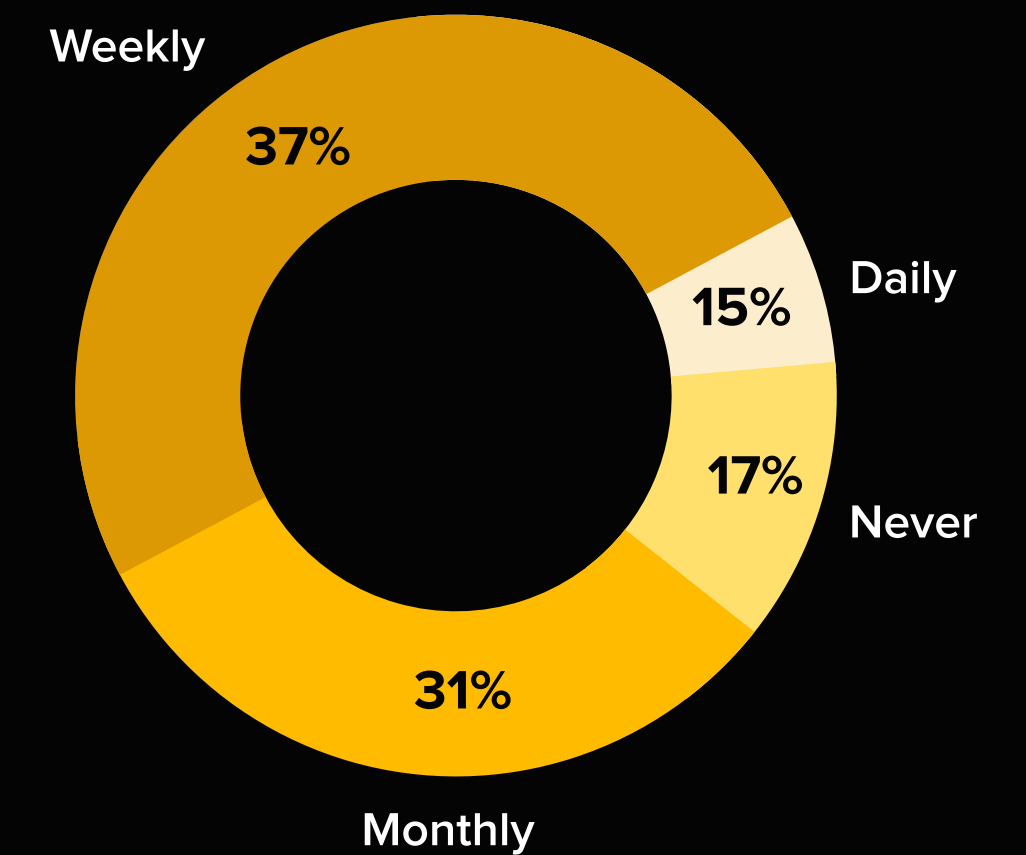


Employee content is on the rise

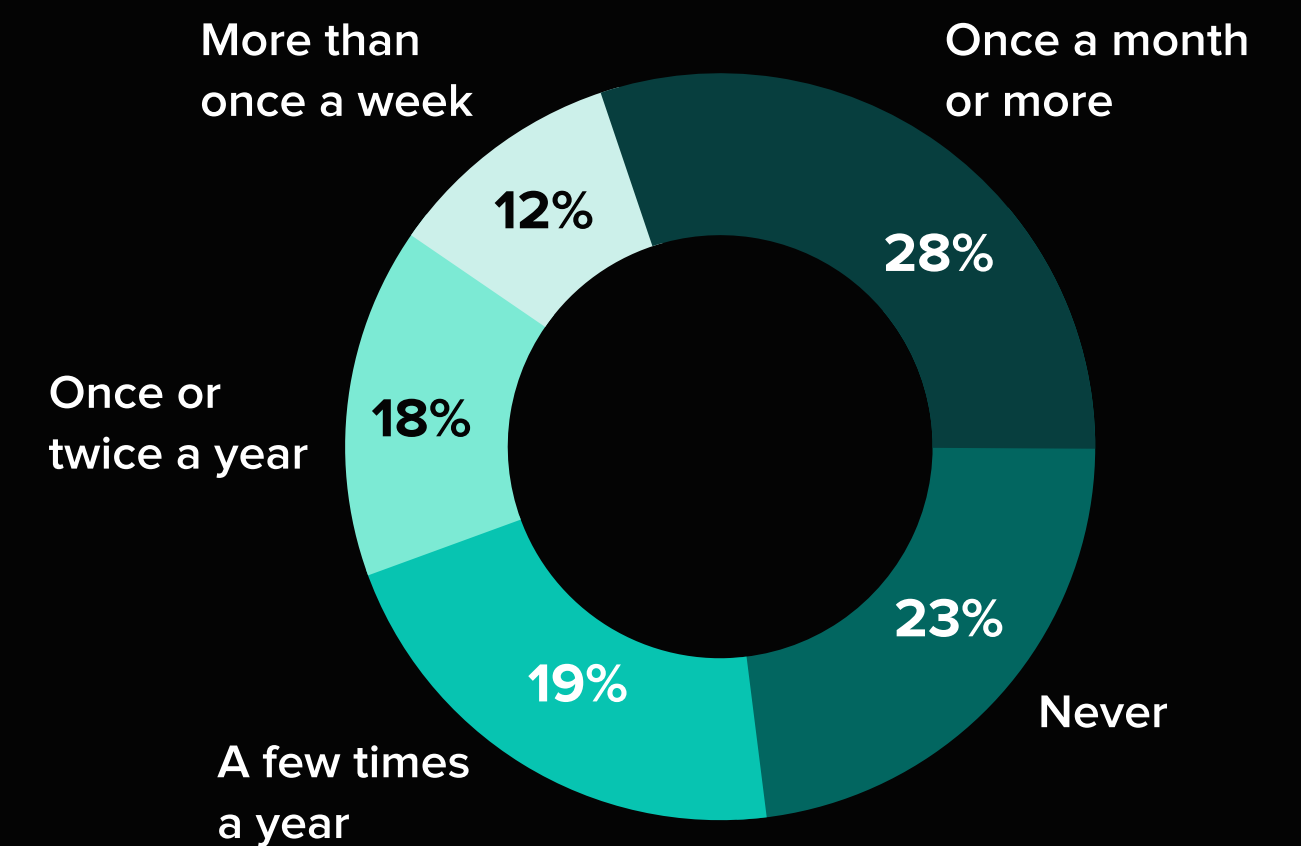
More than half of consumers are seeing employees promoting or representing their company at least once a week, with 15% seeing it daily. This is mostly happening on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, though YouTube and LinkedIn also play a role.

And it's influencing product discovery. Forty percent of people say they discover new products as a result of employee content once a month or more, while 77% do so at least sometimes.

How often the public sees content from employee influencers



How often the public discovers products or services from employee influencers

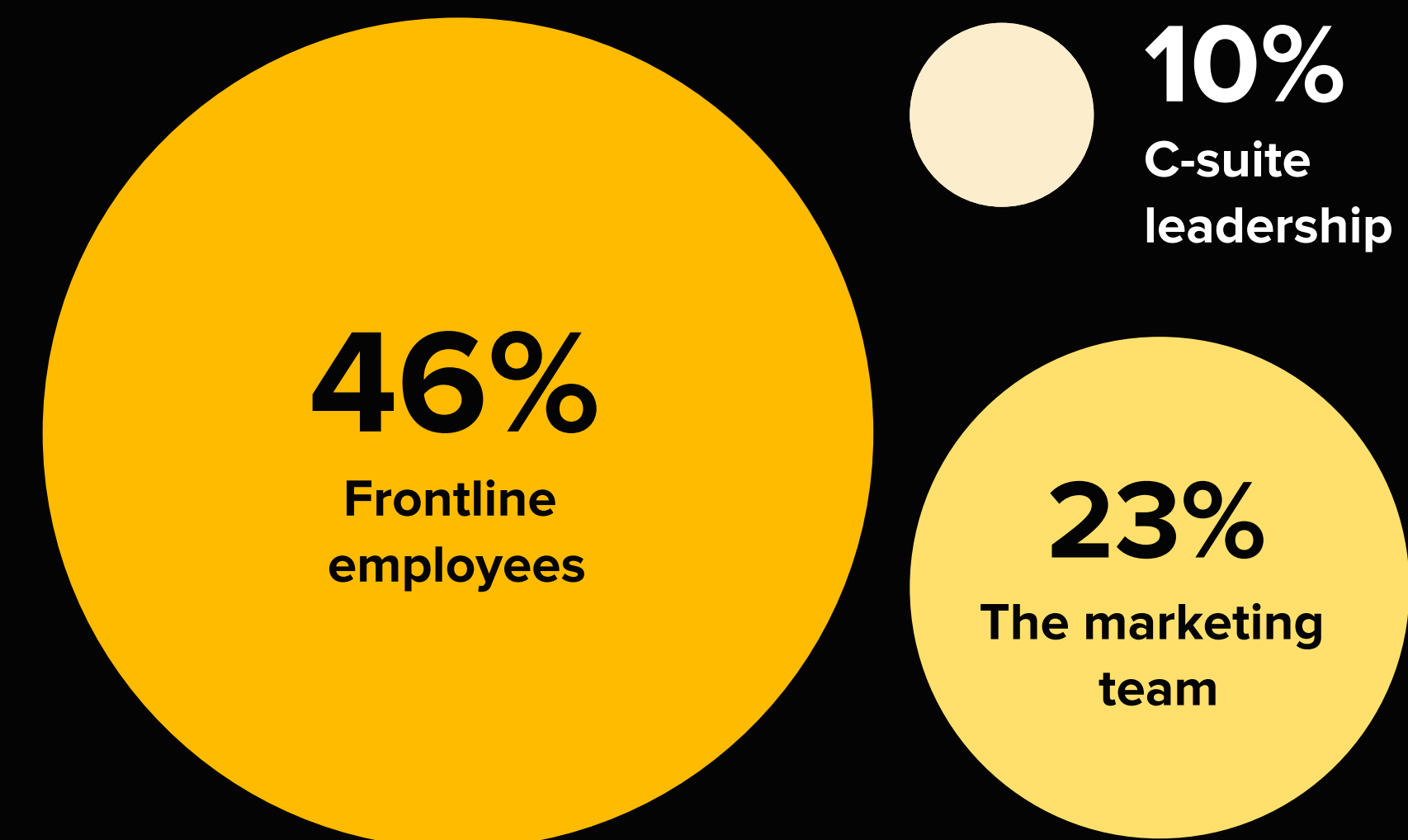


Frontline workers should lead the way

Audiences overwhelmingly want to hear from frontline workers when it comes to employee-generated content. Across all generations, 40% said they found employee influencers more authentic than content from the brand's main account, while only 19% found it less authentic.

People want to hear real stories from the employees closest to the customers and products, and brands should take that into consideration when building out any formalized employee advocacy programs.

Which employee influencers do you want to hear from?



And consumers think brands should pay up

Generating content for social promotion often goes beyond a job description, especially for frontline employees outside of the marketing department. The consensus is that anyone going above and beyond their job description to promote the brand on social should receive extra compensation as a result.

Brands could do this by setting goals for impressions or engagement and paying a fixed amount to any employees that hit pre-determined numbers.

61%

believe that employee influencers should be paid extra for promotional efforts on social



LAUNCH A FORMALIZED

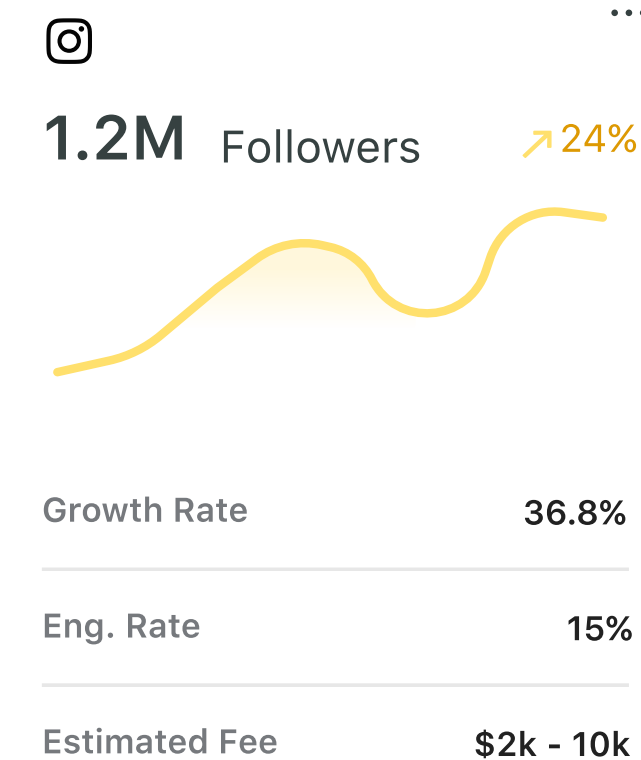
PRO TIP

Launch a formalized employee advocacy program led by frontline workers:

Frontline employees are viewed as significantly more authentic and credible than polished corporate profiles or executive leadership. Forty percent of consumers discover products monthly through employee-generated content, a number that jumps to 62% for Gen Z.

↗ GEN Z 62%

EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY PROGRAM



AI INFLUENCERS REPRESENT A RISK FOR BRANDS

Advances in video and image generation technology in the last 12 months have led to a rise in AI influencers—completely digital creators who insert themselves into popular events, often promoting travel and fashion.

Coachella represents a prominent example that caught people's attention in 2026, as news outlets caught onto the trend and reported out stories of their content at the festival.



The public remains skeptical

It's so far been rare to see AI influencers partner with brands as most are still focused on building a following.

While some are succeeding, consumers are not convinced on the idea of brand partnerships, at least not yet. Almost half said that they were not comfortable with it, while 30% said it depends on the situation.

Only a quarter said they were comfortable with the idea.

Opinion on brands partnering with AI influencers

44% Not comfortable with it

30% It depends

25% Comfortable with it

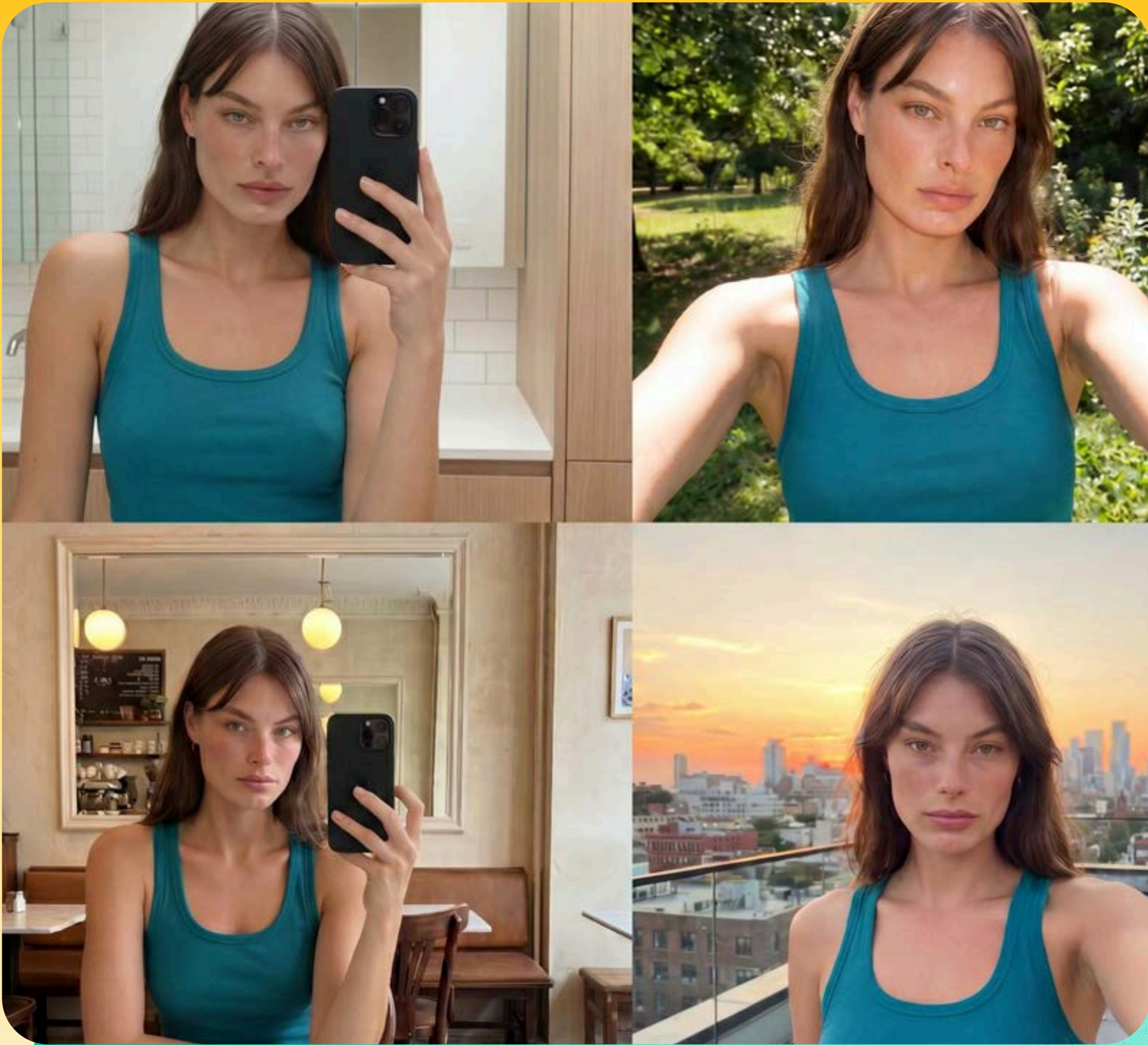
***But it's not always obvious
when influencers are AI***

A little over half of consumers are confident that they don't follow AI influencers, while a quarter admitted that they aren't sure.

This makes for an interesting future for brand partnerships with AI influencers, and brands need to navigate it with care given the skepticism. The public has shown willingness to accept AI, but what they want most is transparency and a good reason why AI was used for a particular campaign. What might start as a positive reaction has the potential to turn negative quickly if the public becomes aware of AI influencer usage that wasn't disclosed.

Do you follow any AI-generated influencers?

- 1 I know that I don't (60%)
- 2 I'm not sure (27%)
- 3 I know that I do (13%)



THE BOTTOM LINE

Dominating today's landscape requires brands to completely abandon manual auditing workflows and rigid profile demographics. The modern feed on the biggest networks used by influencers has shifted entirely to algorithmic recommendation engines that mean content distribution has little to do with follower networks.

Consumers don't check follower counts before they engage; they look for subject relevance and content style. To eliminate wasted ad-spend and safeguard future investments, organizations must move away from outdated activation practices and anchor their creator strategy in topical alignment above all else.

While influencer identification should now be more content focused, there are also rising trends beyond traditional influencers. AI creators are on the rise, though the public remains skeptical, while many employees are emerging as influential voices of their brand whether or not the brand itself is involved. To succeed, brands must be on top of all these trends and maintain an agile strategy that can pivot quickly if one category gains momentum.



About the data

Consumer survey was conducted online by Panoplai, a global market research firm, on behalf of Sprout Social. Participants included 2,250 social media users across the US, UK and Australia. The survey was conducted from May 14, 2026 to May 20, 2026.

Demographic Highlights:

Country: 1,000 US, 1,000 UK, 250 AUS

Ages: 559 Gen Z, 696 Millennial, 632 Gen X, 363 Boomers

Gender: 1,199 Female, 1,051 Male

The marketer survey was conducted online by Panoplai, a global market research firm, on behalf of Sprout Social. Participants included 296 social media professionals across the US, UK and Australia who are responsible for managing or reporting on influencer partnerships. The survey was conducted from March 20, 2026 to April 6, 2026.

Demographic Highlights:

Country: 152 US, 144 UK

sproutsocial

About Sprout Social

Sprout Social is a leading AI-powered social intelligence platform, built on the belief that All Business is SocialSM. Powered by Trellis, Sprout's proprietary AI agent, the platform transforms real-time social media signals into actionable insights that drive business forward. Consistently recognized **as a top software by G2**, Sprout enables brands to deliver smarter, faster business impact through a suite of solutions including comprehensive publishing and engagement, customer care, influencer marketing, advocacy and predictive media intelligence. Sprout's software operates across all major social networks and digital platforms. For more information about Sprout Social (NASDAQ: SPT), visit **sproutsocial.com**.

Request a demo