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DOI: 10.2478/minib-2019-0016



Summary

The article is a collection of analyses carried out on the basis of literature on the subject and data collected with the utilization of desk research method. It also presents conclusions from surveys conducted by means of a qualitative method — IDI technique — during the Congress of Public Relations Professionals, which took place in April 2018 in Rzeszów. In the group of respondents there were representatives of public relations branch who cooperate with influencers and on top of that have rich experience in the area of PR activities conducted by means of the Internet. The goal of this article is assessment of the relationships occurring in the context of cooperation of PR specialists with influencers, as well as identifying the prospects for changes and potential trends in this area.

Among the key conclusions drawn in course of the conducted research we find the one which suggests that using influencers for communication and promotion-related activities is recognized as both a chance and threat for the public relations industry. However, the aspect of threats is particularly important, as it has a direct impact on the emerging and persisting image crises. Due to the fact that influencers enjoy a lot of freedom in their activity in combination with the faith of their clients in their professional approach, there is a risk of emergence of actions which will not just fail to satisfy the assumptions of a promotional campaign, but may also directly hit the image of a given entity.

Experts predict that using influencers for promotion will also in the nearest time be a growing trend, which will take hold among solutions used in communication with target groups.

Keywords: public relations, influencer marketing, media relations, crisis management

Introduction

Contemporary companies keep looking for new channels for reaching their target groups and in the process they analyze the possibility of using instruments they could use to efficiently convey messages containing persuasive contents. Advertising, public relations, personal sales, or other directions of support for chosen processes associated with marketing and creating an atmosphere around a branch in target groups are differently assessed in terms of particularly the benefits and barriers associated with their application. Argumentation during the assessment of them also often concerns such areas as efficiency and effectiveness of conveying the message. Here it is natural that while information and IT technologies are constantly developing, new methods and techniques of communicating are emerging, companies are constantly testing and using identified sources of potential contact with the recipients. They search for channels which enable support for promotional and communicational activities conducted by units, or external entities dedicated to this purpose.

It is worth pointing out that among the task spheres of public relations used most often by professionals there are relations with media. Despite the growth of the number of modern technological solutions, such classic techniques as regular contact with journalists, that is, creation and distribution of press releases are still popular and regarded as efficient. Despite a thesis formulated this way, it is necessary to remark that the development of communication channels is changing directions, while the approach to their utilization is evolving. Also, the speed at which we communicate is growing. Taking this into consideration, it is necessary to point out that even the tools and techniques recognized as classic have to be adapted to what's new. It is certainly possible to conclude that apart from technological development which will support the processes of communication with the environment, in the nearest time we will experience further and dynamic shifting of focus to own media.

This article is a collection of analyses, but also an effect of research works conducted among the experts from the public relations branch. It contains an assessment of the possibility of using influencers for the purposes of carrying out information campaigns and supporting activities from the area of public relations. As has been mentioned, the material has been prepared

on the basis of qualitative research conducted by a research team of Instytut Rozwoju Społeczeństwa Informacyjnego and EXACTO sp. z o.o. in April 2018 during the 18th Congress of Public Relations held in Rzeszów¹. IDI technique was used. The technique of individual in-depth interviews is dedicated to a complex subject, where the moderator highlights main subjects, lets the expert elaborate on the subject freely and by means of additional questions helps carry out a preliminary systematization of the obtained content. The scenario of the interview, due to the multi-aspect character of the phenomenon assumed freedom in terms of the choice of details of expert statements. Experts have been asked to define the role and position of influencers in the PR branch. The starting point was the characteristic of the current models of cooperation between PR agencies and influencers. In successive points experts talked about the directions of development of the influencer branch, the issue of specific niches in which they feel comfortable and threats for companies deciding to assign tasks to influencers. The obtained materials were processed by means of qualitative analysis. That's why in the article no data in figures is presented. Instead, there are subjects, assessments and conclusions drawn from interviews.

The interviews were subject to qualitative analysis that's why in the article data and sets of figures are not presented, while general assessments and conclusions are shown. What was adopted as the main hypothesis is that changes in the area of communicating will evolve towards own media, but also to an ever greater extent will be focused on cooperation with influencers, which is nevertheless to a major extent exposed to the risk of image crises.

New trends in communicating and building relations with the environment

In the first place it is worth pointing out that one of the trends which in the coming years will be more and more visible and more and more important from the point of view of commercial entities is using influencers as a transmitter of contents between a company and its environment. Certainly, in the nearest years the area of cooperation with influencers will be to an ever greater extent managed by public relations agencies, or entities of a similar character. It is worth

mentioning here that companies of this kind are opened by influencers themselves, who know this environment best. One of the first such agencies was the already not existing Galopujący Pancernik established by, among others, Maciej "Mediafun" Budzich².

Interest in cooperation with the community of influencers arises from the fact that recipients more and more often seek opinions, or support from influencers in the process of making an assessment. The term "influencer" comes from the word "influence". Even though the Polish branch community discussed the possibility of coming up with a Polish term for the phenomenon (one of the proposals was the word "wpływacz"³), but eventually the name "influencer" became popular. Here it is worth distinguishing three main types: microinfluencers, macroinfluencers and celebrities. Micro- and macroinfluencers are, generally speaking, people creating contents on Internet channels (e.g. bloggers, youtubers, instagramers, as well as gamers), they differ in terms of reach and the group of recipients⁴. At the same time, celebrities are media personalities.

Influencer can also be defined as a social media user who has gathered a big group of followers. He, or she is credible and authentic for them and thanks to this, he or she can influence the interactions and decisions of his, or her recipients⁵. Through daily activity in social media influencers try to build their personal brand and the engagement of readers/viewers, which can be later used by companies and advertisers to reach consumers⁶. Now an influencer can reach with his, or her message hundreds, or thousands of clients in a matter of a few hours⁷. Almost every day new opinion leaders emerge, setting up blogs, or video channels.

Public relations officials surveyed during IDI point out that for many recipients influencers are more credible than the message conveyed by traditional media. We can also find opinions that it is influencers and not the target group that should be placed in the centre of PR and marketing strategy as people influencing purchasing decisions⁸. Quantitative research confirms the above views and shows that influencers are becoming authorities for their communities and currently it is not just young people who are looking for authorities. For 72% of readers of blogs and viewers of vlogs they are the first source of information about products⁹ (more important even than the opinions of their family and friends). Influencers, thanks to the social media revolution, reach thousands of recipients, while earlier traditional media had a monopoly

for this. The difference is that influencers build with their readers/audience authentic, personal relationships. This isn't just unilateral media-recipients communication. That's why — what's understandable — brands more and more often use this method to reach their clients, to use in public relations and marketing messages personal relationships and emotions associated with them. Influencers are additionally more credible, because they are authentic and represent clients, not companies.

It is particularly in case of implementation of social campaigns that authorities, including a special kind of authorities such as influencers, will be playing an ever greater role. Here it is worth mentioning the participation of well-known persons in campaigns associated with cancer. Jerzy Stuhr's involvement in anti-cancer campaigns and Kora, whose activity contributed substantially to the popularization of knowledge about ovarian cancer may serve as examples. The people participating in IDI interviews pointed out that the activities of such people bring much better results than any information campaigns. The combination of influencers' actions with information campaigns conducted for example in traditional media, or by means of traditional instruments may additionally, substantially strengthen the effect.

How Internet influencers can influence life was shown by one of their bottom-up and non-commercial actions. Blogger StayFly decided to break the algorithms of Google, which in response to entering the phrase "how to commit suicide" would provide efficient ways to commit suicide. The blogg¹⁰ convinced a few dozen other creators to create entries with a similar title, whose content would discourage readers from committing suicide and gave contacts to specialist clinics. In a short time the search engine started displaying texts from the influencers at the top of the list. The power of this community was used in a social campaign by, among others, Narodowy Instytut Zdrowia Publicznego — Państwowy Zakład Higieny, which carried out a campaign titled "HCV, jestem świadom" (HCV, I am aware) with the participation of five bloggers and youtubers¹¹. It supported standard actions of PZH concerning HCV infections and the methods of avoiding them and reached four million recipients.

Activity in the area of public relations isn't limited just to the creation of contents and sending press releases. The purpose of these activities is based

also, or perhaps above all on building long-term and mutually beneficial relations with groups in the environment. This also concerns those who are transmitters of contents. Only well-built and solidified relations can contribute to effects that a company, or organization desires. These relationships are a component of trust which is the basis for the totality of management processes associated with conducting business activity. An example of an interesting campaign which is based on the assumption of building relations is the campaign carried out by Orange — "Najmniejsza kampania świata"¹², (the smallest campaign in the world). In course of the campaign an assumption was made that a few dozen creators would receive on Facebook personalized Blogger's Day greetings. They were displayed only to them. It was influencers themselves who later shared information about the received greetings on their profiles, appreciating the idea and at the same time building a positive image of the company among their recipients.

It is necessary to point out that relationships discussed here are useful not just during the implementation of public relations campaigns. It is worth creating them also as a form of protection of the brand against a potential crisis. It is the ability to establish proper relations with influencer and communication with them that determine to a large extent whether a PR department is able to prevent potential image crises¹³.

Prospects for changes in the area of task spheres and public relations instruments

For years the scope of instruments assigned to public relations has been changing, but it is not a revolutionary process. Obviously, there is high likelihood that over time the role of an organization's own media will be growing and at the same time the significance of traditional media will be decreasing. Already now many entities run a blog and/or YouTube channel. One of the first companies which launched not just a blog, but a whole blogging platform was Orange Polska (currently, following reorganization the platform is the main part of the press office¹⁴), which received for this the branch award "Złote Spinacze"¹⁵.

The surveyed experts in the interviews analyzed in this article point out that in the coming years cooperation with influencers will be gaining

importance at the expense of other, traditional techniques and methods of communicating. The role of printed press is weakening due to the fact that recipients obtain more and more information from the Internet. Traditional media, looking for new sources of income use to an ever greater extent the Internet as a channel for distribution of contents. The respondents suggest that these media may start focusing on a completely different message — based on tested, expert set of data. It may turn out that traditional media supported by messages on the Internet will return to their proper place in terms of opinion-forming capacity. However, the model for reaching the recipient will be different than now, because the above-mentioned transition to the Internet is now becoming more and more common. Development of the network may encourage traditional media to focus on quality. Cheap information on the Internet, which often contains fake news, unchecked data, may assume the role of an additional source of knowledge, which will require verification anyway. We could assume, following the opinions of respondents that press release will start playing a different role than now, it will only serve as support for journalists. It is also possible to assume that in the nearest future we will be paying for verified information, for surveys, analyses and quality reports serving in-depth economic analyses in the micro and macro categories. At the same time the role of influencers and organizations' own media will grow stronger.

The surveyed representatives of the public relations branch suggest that among the tools used by people dealing with public relations the significance of press offices and media bases, but only those which satisfy more and more restrictive requirements with regard to information and data security is growing in a visible way. This comes from the fact that General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) introduced on the territory of the European Union forces those who actively use personal data to protect them in a sufficient manner.

Also, systems for monitoring the efficiency of media activities, including press releases sent to journalists, distributed by appropriate offices, or other dispatch systems, addressed not just to traditional media, but also Internet media will be getting more and more important. Startups Prow¹⁶ and Newslink¹⁷, can serve as examples here, as they enable the dispatch of personalized press releases, managing media databases and creating own blog/brand journal. Modern tools

make it possible to automate work, facilitate creating distribution lists. At the same time journalists receive visually fine-tuned piece of information without heavy attachments. Additionally, the tool makes it possible to check, whether a particular message reached the recipient and whether it was read by the recipient. Such solutions also have an additional advantage — if a mistake is detected, such piece of information can be quickly corrected, which is impossible in case of sending messages by means of e-mail.

Currently, we have much better knowledge about journalists, media and influencers than in the past. Thanks to modern technologies we are able to follow their activity in the media, also on the Internet, which makes it possible to more precisely adapt the message to the target groups. Specialized tools, which not just monitor current statements on particular subjects made by influencers (Brabd24, or Unamo), but also present data about influencers themselves with information about the reach of their activity, or who they cooperate with (Sotrender, Whitepress, Hash.fm, or InfluencerTool) have appeared on the market.

What currently constitutes a value is not just the channel itself, but also, perhaps above all, building an appropriate content, which can reach the recipients.

Another issue, which has been highlighted by the respondents, is the fact that now press conferences don't bring such effects as before. The conclusion that the formula of press conferences is running out, doesn't really mean that they will be forgotten. It is obvious that there is a group of entities, which will still be using such forms of reaching the media, for example, government institutions, or politicians for whom briefing, or press conference still are and will be channels important from the point of view of not just the communicational effect, but also building relations. The situation is similar in case of big companies, which exert substantial influence not just on a given branch, but also its economic, or social environment. A conference in this case may still be an efficient way to reach a broad group of recipients. At the same time it is worth pointing out that conferences can be broadcast online without the necessity to organize a special team, using live feed on social media platforms. Public relations professionals in their activities more and more often use technologies, which enable online

broadcasting. This way a kind of a substitute of press conference, or its evolution adapted to the current reality has been formed. The first application which allowed broadcasting was Periscope on Twitter, but now this functionality has been introduced to almost all services, among others, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, or Snapchat.

Influencer as a substitute for typical media relations activity

Social media have fundamentally changed the balance of power between clients and brands giving influencers the ability to influence a brand¹⁸. Blogs are read by 33% of Internet users and 29% watch vlogs¹⁹. Using influencers in public relations and marketing helps establish direct and bilateral relations with consumers²⁰. Before the era of social media the communication of a brand with consumers was unilateral.

The surveyed representatives of the PR branch claim that using creators from the Internet is much more effective than the impact of advertising messages. If a company wants to convince consumers to change their attitudes, it becomes necessary to combine advertising with the support of influencers. It is worth remembering that consumers to an ever lesser degree trust advertisements. Taking into consideration the huge number of various kinds of advertising formats that consumers are literally flooded with, both in traditional and online media, they stop paying attention to them, or if there is such an option, they block them²¹. That's why using influencers is now more effective than advertisements and standard press releases.

The survey titled "Niecodzienne zwyczaje zakupowe" (Unusual shopping habits), shows that three quarters of Poles regard tv commercials as unreliable²². At the same time, in a survey conducted by Polskie Stowarzyszenie Bloggerów i Vlogerów (Polish Association of Bloggers and Vloggers)²³ 33% of respondents concluded that they bought a product under the influence of influencers and 32% abandoned the plan to purchase a product after finding a negative opinion on a blog, or on YouTube.

One of the latest examples of the impact of an influencer on purchasing decisions is the case of Mustang brand. After the creator of the blog jakoszczedzacpieniadze.pl published a post in which he

informed that he bought a Mustang, five of his readers bought such a car²⁴. Situations of this kind take place among others because "Internet users appreciate valuable contents and respect people who create such contents"²⁵.

According to the respondents, cooperation with influencers substitutes, forces out media patronage, but also other media relations activities. In the past journals, newspapers, television, that is, classic sources of information served the role of entities shaping opinions. Nowadays everybody can become a broadcaster of messages, can create and distribute content. This doesn't mean departure from traditional media, but suggests that activities conducted by a company in this field, such as media relations, or advertising, may be complemented by cooperation with influencers. Thanks to the channels for reaching that an influencer uses it is certainly possible to strengthen a message. The broadcaster gains additional engagement of recipients following a portal or a blog run by an influencer, that's why for the very effect of campaign the reach of the channel of a given influencer is important. Taking this into consideration you choose people who can guarantee possibly biggest reception.

However, it is not the reach itself that is most important. The main attributes of influencers are the ability to attract attention and credibility. In case of a campaign it is assumed that a person that a company starts cooperating with should be matched with the product and kind of information. The values presented by the person have to be compatible with the values of a brand and the recipients of the person are the representatives of the particular target group that the company wants to reach. What is also important is engagement, that is, how readers/viewers interact with a given influencer, how they react to his, or her work. Only as soon as all criteria of choice are taken into consideration, it is possible to create an adequate and creative message, which will bring the desired effect. Even though Internet users appreciate authenticity and assume that influencers are not as perfect as celebrities, they are closer to ordinary people²⁶, however, there are limits for common acceptance. It is hard to imagine that the so-called pathostreamers, who display on the Internet their party lifestyle full of swearwords, presenting a negative message, could promote luxury brands, despite their broad reach. However, this doesn't mean that someday they won't become the ambassadors of other

companies which want to reach exactly this group of recipients. The message always has to be coherent with the values of a brand. Only this way it will be possible to achieve benefits coherent with the long-term strategy of a company.

An example of public relations activities (and not strictly sales-related activities) of an adequately chosen group of influencers is, for example, the campaign of Orange titled "12 konwergentnych"²⁷, (12 convergent ones), which was a preliminary step for the introduction of convergent offers (combining a package of services). The campaign focused on explaining what convergence actually is, because at the moment of introduction of the service the word wasn't commonly used. 12 bloggers were chosen and out of them only one — Artur Kurasiński — related to subjects associated with technologies. As the service that the campaign concerned was supposed to be commonly available and not addressed to a handful of enthusiasts, the campaign focused mainly on parenting and lifestyle blogs (among others, makoweczki.pl, domowa.tv, szarmant.pl). Another example is the launch of the Allegro²⁸, service, which is supposed to encourage purchasing appropriate computer equipment for players. E-sports players were chosen as the ambassadors of the venture.

The division of influencers, according to PR specialists

Influencers can be divided into various groups gathered around a particular subject area. Thus, there are, among others, gaming, business, lifestyle, marketing, automotive influencers. Practically in every category we can find an Internet creator specialized in it. Influencers can also be divided into those who deliver high-quality content of "premium character" and those who have a broad reach, yet deliver low-quality content and their activities rely mainly on stirring controversy. We can name as a member of the first group, for example, Konrad Kruczkowski from the Halo Ziemia blog, who from the very start of his activity has been engaged in social campaigns. For one of them, namely, the cycle of reports on difficult fatherhood Halo Tato he received the Kampania Społeczna 2016 award. WBK bank supported him in this project within the framework of its CSR activity²⁹. On the

other hand, at the other end of the spectrum we have the so-called pathostreamers, who have already been mentioned before. The problem with their activity, contents produced by them and their influence on underage recipients is so significant that the Commissioner for Human Rights organized a round table to address the issue³⁰.

Security of cooperation with influencers

The respondents point out that cooperation with influencers is difficult and security in this area depends on how big the dose of freedom given to the influencer actually is. It is known that usually it is paid cooperation in course of which the client has control over the conveyed messages. However, it is necessary to remember that Internet creators know their channel, the form of messages they use and their recipients best. That's why the opinion of an influencer concerning the issue of publication should also be taken into consideration. This makes an appropriate selection of creators, so that they satisfy the requirements of a company, even more important, as it will facilitate the conduct of the campaign itself and will make it possible to avoid unnecessary tensions, or even crises.

There are also influencers whose activity is controversial in character. They may form bad connotations with regard to the subject of cooperation. Politically engaged Internet creators lead to a situation in which their views in the area directly influence consumer groups. The situation is similar in case of people who have violated norms of social behaviour and rules commonly accepted in the society. There are also creators who build their recognizability on hate (ungrounded and non-constructive criticism which doesn't relate to the content, but focuses on attacking the person on the other side of a dispute) and generating negative contents. A brand which doesn't want to be associated with such things, needs to take into consideration the necessity of carrying out appropriate research before hiring an influencer for cooperation on promotion, or communicating about a product, or company.

It is possible to find out how important the choice of appropriate influencers is by analyzing a crisis experienced by LG. To promote new

smartphones the company started cooperation with the YouTuber known as Wardęga, who is known for so-called pranks, which means surprising people with untypical behaviour. In a video prepared for LG influencer he simply told his story as a YouTuber. However, "Dziewuchy Dziewuchom" (Girls for Girls) pointed out to LG that the author earlier made a video in which he molested women³¹.

This example shows that entities which want to hire an influencer should earlier learn about the campaigns in which he or she was involved, as well as the contents he, or she created. Looking exclusively at the creator's popularity may lead to many image-related threats. The respondents say clearly that the lack of detailed research and analyses before hiring an influencer may lead to unpleasant consequences. Such a person may become a threat for an entity, or a product which she, or he is supposed to support with his, or her activities.

Another example of a wrong choice of provider of content was Orange's advertisement with Maffashion, a fashion blogger, who "lost" her phone. This was a promotion of a new service, that is, a backup of data from smartphones in the cloud. Experts and recipients felt deceived³². At the same time one of the brands asked a blogger to refrain from the publication of a text after she had actively engaged in promoting Czarny Protest³³.

As has already been mentioned, what is also important for companies starting cooperation with influencers is reach, however, here it is necessary to realize the fact that also in this area there are many abuses. In 2018 it was revealed that a numerous group of celebrities in the USA buy fans³⁴. In Poland also one of the bloggers, Maciek Budzich, carried out an experiment, which involved buying followers on Twitter³⁵. In 2018 frauds on Instagram attracted much attention³⁶, Instagram is becoming a more and more popular platform for marketing and PR activities. The scale of buying fans was so big that also this portal decided to remove fake profiles and comments created by bots³⁷. That's why when you plan a campaign and analyze the effects, you should not just check the reach (number of followers), but also their engagement. If according to declarations an influencer has tens of thousands of fans, yet his, or her posts, photos, videos are very rarely commented, it should be a warning signal for every PR specialist.

Another aspect of the security of cooperation with influencers is the moment when a crisis hits. In such case it is not just preparation, but also the way a company reacts that counts. The best example are two events associated with one of the first Polish bloggers — Kominek (now Jason Hunt). In the first case, following his explicit publication concerning bad products from Dr. Oetker³⁸, the company sent him instructions telling him what he should change in his text. Obviously, this led to even more serious problems, as the blogger himself recognized it as an attack against him³⁹. Burger King⁴⁰, brand reacted in a completely different way, as after a critical text about its burgers it offered the blogger a trip to its headquarters in the USA, so that he could learn about the company and its products. Even in case when we don't have built relations with influencers, in time of crisis still the most depends on the actions taken by a company.

Summary

Summing up the deliberations contained in the article, it is necessary to conclude that the surveyed representatives of public relations branch see a potential in using influencers in activities associated with communication and promotion. This will also be — at least in the coming years — a growing trend, which will establish its position among new solutions used for broad access to target groups. Recipients themselves, tired by omnipresent advertisements are also looking for new channels for communicating with brands. That's why using influencers and their activity associated with cooperation with companies will be bringing better effects than standard actions.

Influencers build their message on the basis of direct and personal relations with the recipients, influencing their purchasing decisions. However, taking into consideration the analyses resulting from research, companies which decide to take advantage of the option of supporting promotion with the message distributed by Internet-based creators, have to be aware of the threats associated with such cooperation. These threats will certainly lead to serious image-related crises.

What may also be a barrier for engaging in this type of activity is also the fact that PR department doesn't have a direct and final influence on the end effect of influencers' actions (video, reviews, post, or entry on a blog). Nevertheless, keeping in mind the existing threats, organizations or their PR teams can protect a brand against an image crises before starting cooperation.

It is also worth pointing out that there is no single, simple recipe for cooperating with influencers — personalities which have an impact on a big group of recipients. The best thing you can do to protect yourself against the potential emergence of a crisis and to properly react to it is building individual relations. As research has shown, PR professionals themselves note that the old communication tools (press conferences, releases) stop bringing the desired effects. In order to overcome the noise in communication and get noticed by the recipients they reach for solutions with the utilization of influencers already tested by marketing. It is because on the Internet the line between marketing and PR has become blurred⁴¹. The consumer finds it hard to distinguish when an influencer is taking part in a marketing campaign and when in a public relations campaign. For him, or her it is the emotions associated with a brand that an influencer's material will evoke in him, or her.

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