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BRANDS MUST EVOLVE - BRANDS MUST EVOLVE

THE FUTURE OF AFFILIATES, INFLUENCERS & AMBASSADORS:

How Brands Must Evolve to Stay Culturally Relevant



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As the media landscape changes, so should the way we think about brand partnerships. It's no longer only about what your brand is saying — **it's just as important who is saying it.**

Brands must evolve beyond traditional frameworks of affiliates, influencers, and brand ambassadors and embrace innovative strategies to stay relevant and impactful.

BRANDS MUST

EVOLVE



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THE TRADITIONAL SEGMENTS OF BRAND PARTNERSHIPS

1. Affiliates: Short-Term Performance-Driven Sales Drivers

Affiliates are commission-based partners who generate revenue through measurable conversions. They succeed by driving clicks and purchases, often through blogs, review sites, and online platforms.

Examples:

- Amazon Associates Program: Bloggers and YouTubers earn commissions through product links.
- Sephora Affiliate Program: Beauty reviewers drive sales through tutorials.
- Tripadvisor/Booking.com: Travel affiliates generate bookings via embedded links.

Strengths: High ROI tracking, clear attribution, scalable reach.

2. Influencers: Attention and Engagement Generators

Influencers harness personal credibility and social reach to spark trends, cultural conversations, and product adoption.

Examples:

- Charli D'Amelio x Dunkin' Donuts: Viral product tie-in through TikTok.
- Sabrina Carpenter x Redken: High-impact influencer marketing campaign in 2024–2025.
- Bumble x Amelia Dimoldenberg of the viral Chicken Shop Date YouTube interview series: Year-long campaign blending humor, dating culture, and event marketing.

Strengths: Authentic storytelling, cultural influence, trust-based engagement.

“The longer you leave it in... the better it feels.”



3. Brand Ambassadors: Long-Term Identity Builders

Ambassadors embody the values of a brand, creating consistent, enduring associations.

Examples:

- Michael Jordan x Nike: Air Jordans became the best-selling shoe in history.
- Nespresso x George Clooney: Synonymous with sophistication and brand identity.
- Beyoncé x Pepsi: Multi-year collaboration spanning ads, sponsorships, and tours.

Strengths: Longevity, credibility, lifestyle alignment, and co-creation opportunities.

IT'S A SYSTEM THAT HAS WORKED.

Currently, affiliate marketing drives
16% of all global e-commerce sales.

Influencer Marketing

11X

Greater ROI
Compared to other digital marketing

76%

Trust Real People
Over Branded Content

Brand Ambassadors

74%

More Likely to Trust
when a brand is endorsed by someone they admire or relate to



BUT PROBLEMS ARE ARISING.

Affiliates Challenges:

The model has thin margins and is vulnerable to fraud, including fake leads and cookie stuffing—where affiliates earn commissions on sales they didn't actually drive by silently placing tracking cookies in users' browsers.

Affiliate Fraud Impact

\$1.4B

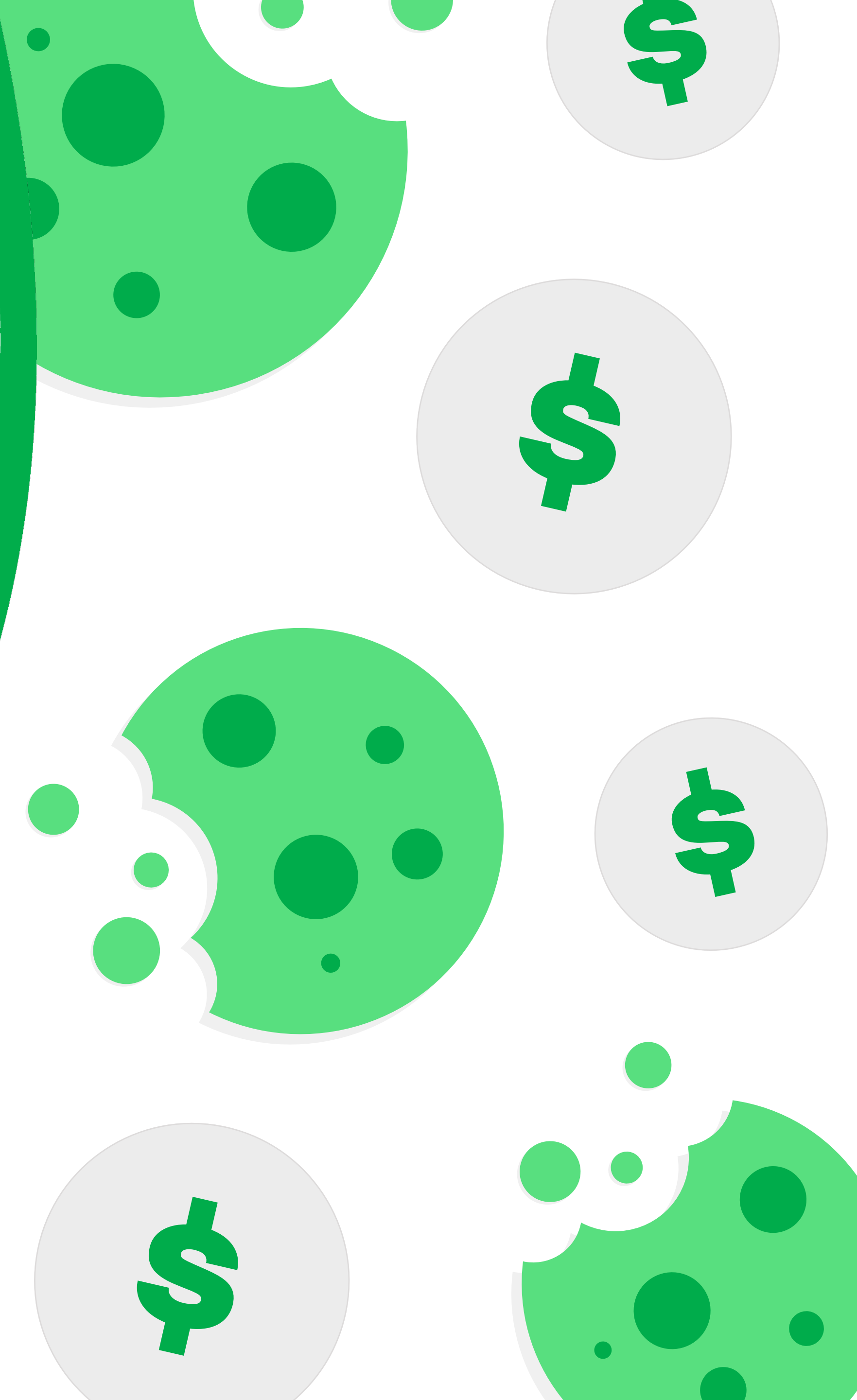
Annual Global Cost
lost to affiliate fraud worldwide

1.8%

E-commerce Revenue Loss
from chargebacks and fraud-related
costs tied to fake leads

Incentivized clicks can drive up payouts without generating real value. Using affiliates also creates brand control issues and potential credibility damage from clickbait.

BUT PROBLEMS ARE ARISING





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Influencer Challenges:

Inflated fees, fake followers, inconsistent content quality, and pressure on influencers to prioritize metrics over authenticity. Top-tier influencers can demand huge fees, sometimes outweighing the value they bring. Academic research shows ambiguity around the true value of sponsored content, creating skepticism among audiences and agencies. Brands that focus solely on short-term results risk undermining the authenticity of their campaigns and alienating audiences.

76% of people say they're more likely to trust content shared by "normal" people. And influencers are no longer "normal" people.

AMA.org says "Sponsored content operates in a unique space where brands, influencers, and audiences converge. While influencers offer authenticity and audience trust, brands often prioritize reach and sales metrics. This mismatch of goals can lead to friction."



BUT PROBLEMS ARE ARISING

Brand Ambassador Challenges:

There is a large reputation risk when ambassadors face scandals (e.g., Tiger Woods, Lance Armstrong, Jared Fogle, Chris Brown, Paula Deen, Kanye West, Kendall Jenner's failed Pepsi ad...the list goes on.) Companies using Tiger Woods as a Brand Ambassador lost about \$12 billion in market value in the weeks following his infidelity scandal.

These moments can erode years of brand equity overnight. Tying your brand to a personality is becoming a bigger risk and can become an even bigger liability.



THE NEXT FRONTIER.

Reframing Affiliates, Influencers, and Brand Influencers for the Future.

Flash Sales are the new Affiliates

Traditionally treated as perpetual discount machines, affiliates should instead be positioned as a quick tactical growth lever.

Tiered rewards for new customers.

Giving affiliates and influencers higher rates for new customer acquisitions or driving high order values improves performance by aligning incentives.

Without proper rules, up to 40% of affiliate-reported sales can come from existing customers who would have purchased anyway.

Leverage affiliates and influencers for short bursts to clear seasonal or excess inventory.

Research shows that urgency-driven and seasonal promotions, like flash sales, can increase short-term sales by up to 35–50%, but they are most effective when used sparingly.

Overuse leads to "promotion fatigue," where customers delay purchases until discounts are offered.



Leap Takeaway: No more set it and forget it. Use affiliates in short bursts, combined with tiered incentives to ensure they drive incremental revenue while protecting margins and brand perception.

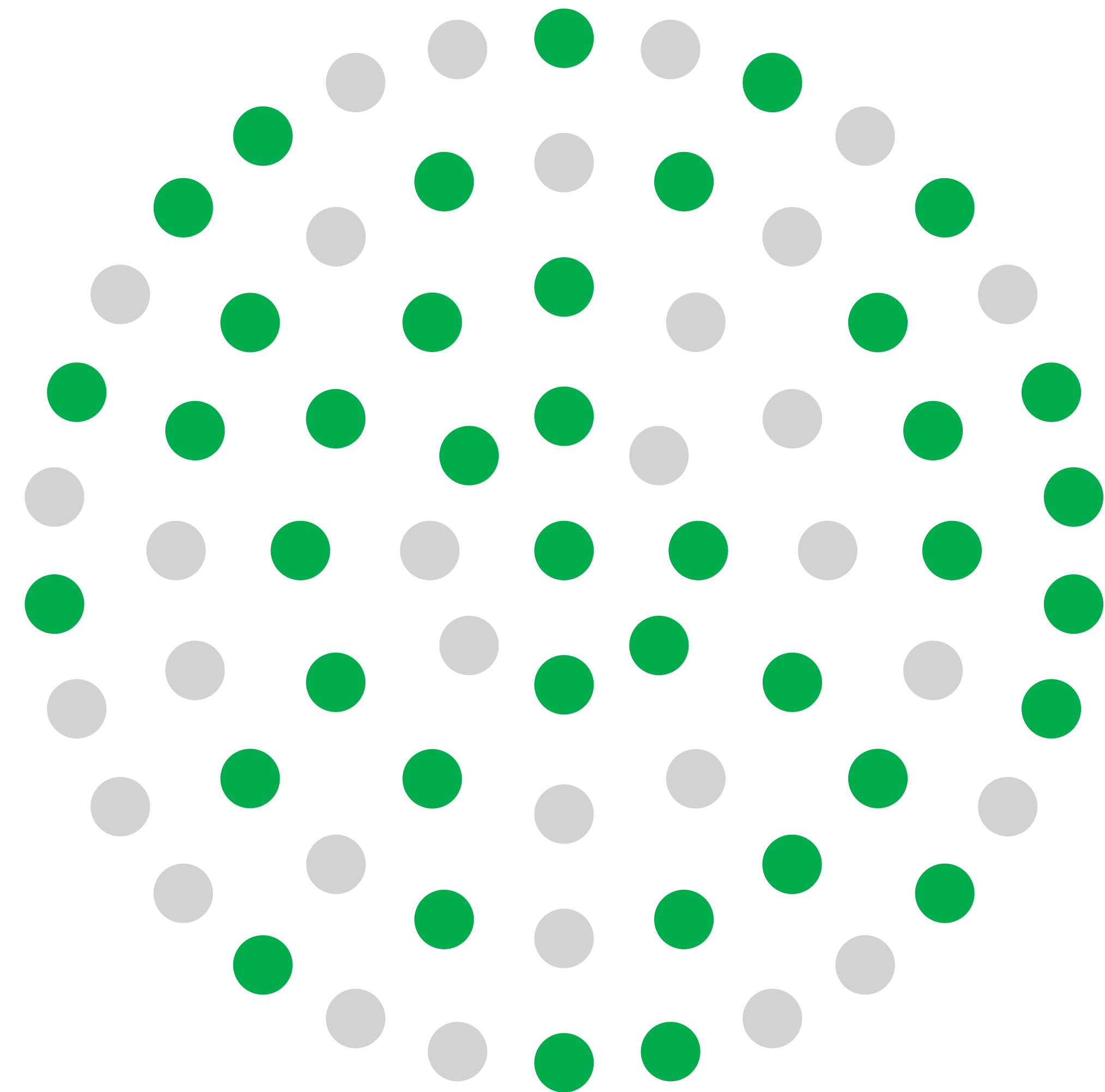
FLASH SALE!

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MARKET RESEARCH IS THE NEW INFLUENCERS

Traditionally prioritizing reach and short-term viral buzz, instead brands should create **multi-micro-influencer “test lab campaigns.”**

Using smaller groups of influencers ensures a more diverse audience and higher engagement rates compared to big influencers. A HubSpot survey showed that **56% of marketers working with micro-influencers saw higher engagement than celebrity influencers.**



● 56% saw higher engagement with micro-influencers than celebrity influencers.

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KNOW BEFORE YOU GO!

Micro-influencers can operate like real-time test labs that can help brands discover new customer segments, test new messaging or products, and de-risk big launches before scaling nationally. Kantar data shows that **brands using micro-influencers for pre-launch seeding campaigns saw 25–30% more accurate predictions** of adoption rates versus control groups.



Leap Takeaway: Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Diversify with micro-influencers (10–20 per demographic group) for testing new products, refining messaging, and uncovering new segments. Use unique promo codes to measure conversions and encourage polls and Q&As to generate real-time feedback.



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CONTENT CREATION IS THE NEW BRAND AMBASSADOR

Traditionally focused on a celebrity brand endorsement, brands should focus on **culturally relevant storytelling**.

The Lego Movie (2014) wasn't an ad, it was a blockbuster piece of content that created brand ambassadors out of Chris Pratt, Will Ferrell, Elizabeth Banks, and Will Arnett. It increased Lego sales by 25% sales and helped LEGO regain its status as the world's most powerful brand, overtaking even giants like Google in Brand Finance's Global 500 ranking.

It also laid fertile ground for spin-offs, sequels, merchandise, TV adaptations, and theme park attractions, turning LEGO from a toy company into a storytelling franchise, exponentially helping sales.



CULTURALLY RELEVANT STORYTELLING.



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The Flamin' Hot Cheetos movie became Searchlight Pictures' biggest streaming hit of all time.

McDonalds even commissioned McMillions, an HBO docuseries about a scam regarding their famous Monopoly game promotion, to own the narrative, gain brand equity through nostalgia, and elevate their promotion into a culturally relevant story.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT STORYTELLING.

FOCUSING ON CONTENT INSTEAD OF CELEBRITIES CREATES:

Brand affinity:

Authentic stories grab attention in a way traditional campaigns rarely do, creating an emotional bond with consumers.

Scalability:

From big blockbusters to YouTube shorts, content creation works across all budgets.

Longevity:

Unlike one-off endorsements, content becomes part of culture and continues to drive engagement long after release, sparking conversations, comments, memes, and spin-offs, creating ongoing engagement.



Leap Takeaway: Audiences care about stories, not logos. A one-off endorsement feels transactional, while immersive content — films, series, shorts — builds worlds where audiences choose to opt-in and engage.

A BONUS TOOL: BRAND PLACEMENT

Brand placement in media is emerging as one of the most organic and influential ways to reach audiences. Unlike ads, placements cannot be swiped away, fast-forwarded, or blocked. They seamlessly become part of a story while embedding the brand into culture.

Emily in Paris x Netflix: Emily in Paris inspired multiple Instagram accounts with up to 170,000 followers that break down and identified looks from the show. To capitalize on demand, Netflix teamed up with Google Lens to allow fans to use the image recognition technology to shop looks or find similar pieces to those featured in the show.

The Italian Job x Mini-Cooper: With a Mini-Cooper placed directly in the center of the action, every trailer became a Mini-cooper ad and created a 22% bump in sales.

U.S. Bank x Happy Gilmore 2: U.S. Bank worked with Netflix and Adam Sandler's production company for Happy Gilmore 2, "from the early stages of making the movie, fending off other interested brands to appear as a headliner sponsor in a climatic scene," according to the WSJ.

Why It Works

Cultural Relevance: Centers brands in memorable culture moments. Research from Kantar shows audiences rate brand placements as "less disruptive and more authentic."

Visibility and recall: Nielsen research shows brand placements can increase brand recall by up to 20–30% compared to traditional ads.

Longevity: Content lives on through streaming, memes, and fan engagement. Every rewatch is another free impression.

OUR CONCLUSION

The traditional partnership model of affiliates, influencers, and ambassadors has worked — but it's showing its limits: thin margins, fraud risks, inflated fees, loss of authenticity, and reputational vulnerabilities.

The next frontier is not about abandoning these tools, but reimagining them for today's media and cultural landscape:



TAKE YOUR BRAND FROM CONVENTIONAL → CONTEMPORARY

Affiliates → Flash Sales:

Create tactical, short bursts with tiered incentives that drive incremental growth while protecting brand equity.

Ambassadors → Content Creation:

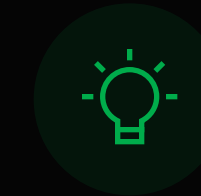
Move from one-off endorsements to immersive storytelling that builds worlds, franchises, and cultural resonance.

Influencers → Market Research:

Use micro-influencers as real-time “test labs” for new products, messaging, and audience segments.

Incorporate Brand Placement:

Integrate brands into entertainment and culture, creating impressions that live on through streaming, memes, and rewatches.



Leap Takeaways:

The lines between **advertising** and **entertainment** are blurring — and that’s an opportunity.

Partnerships can be about more than who is promoting your brand, they can be about **how your brand lives in culture**. Consumers don’t just want products; they want meaningful stories and experiences they can connect with.

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**BRANDS DON'T WIN BY
INTERRUPTING CULTURE, THEY
WIN BY INTEGRATING INTO IT.**

THANK YOU!

Did we get you thinking about new and more relevant ways to tell your brand story? [Give us a call and let us help.](#)

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