

Teaching Generation Z social media marketing: A micro-influencer project

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This paper details an experiential influencer marketing project in which students acted as micro-influencers to develop and promote their personal brands using social media accounts and blogs. Students reflected on their strategic decisions and performance in six weekly Slack posts. The pre-launch preparation, along with students successes, challenges, and overall feedback are presented. Considerations for professors teaching Generation Z students social media marketing are described. The project empowered students to experiment with social media marketing strategies and tactics in a real, hands-on environment. They considered the assignment a powerful, valuable, relevant, and applicable learning experience.

Keywords: influencer marketing, social media, project, learning, Generation Z

INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate students today belong to Generation Z (Gen Z); a generational cohort born approximately between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). While Millennials came of age as social media pioneered and adapted to the digital lifestyle, for Gen Z, social media is a way of life. They are truly digital natives- their cultural experience revolves around social media (Tuten & Marks, 2012). The use of social media as an educational tool can provide value for educators by meeting students ‘on their turf’, aiding in content delivery, collaboration, creation, and interaction (Tuten & Marks, 2012), however, for social media marketing classes, the use of social media is the central vehicle for learning. While students fluently use social media for entertainment, they do not necessarily think of using social media for the educational purposes of learning marketing strategies and tactics (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015), or measuring the performance of their efforts (Bal et al., 2015). A study on student perceptions of social media found they were primarily motivated by social interaction and entertainment, rather than understanding the business uses of social media (Neier & Zayer, 2015). Social media courses have gradually moved from special topics courses, to marketing electives, to staples of marketing curriculums, because graduates with social media skills are highly sought after by employers (Faulds & Mangold, 2014). Marketing education must be on the forefront of the rapidly evolving needs of the marketplace (Brocato et al., 2015). For marketing professors of an older generation, teaching Gen Z in their digital world can be daunting. As explained by Crittenden & Crittenden (2015), digital immigrants must learn to engage digital natives in developing strategic skills in their own cultural landscape.

Major challenges in delivering social media marketing as a course includes the time and effort professors must expend to keep up with social media developments, student attitudes toward social media as entertainment rather than a strategically-wielded tool, and a lack of up-to-date materials and resources (Munoz & Wood, 2015). Professors teaching social media marketing quickly learn that to teach social media, one must immerse oneself in social media, as well as accept the likelihood that students will be more knowledgeable and comfortable in some aspects of social media than the professor (Munoz & Wood, 2015; Cowley, 2017). Experiential student projects are recommended to engage Gen Zers’ natural interactivity, connectivity, and creativity in learning how to use social media for marketing (Faulds & Mangold, 2014). Students perceive the use of social media in the classroom as more relevant for real-life applications they will need to develop for their careers (Neier & Zayer, 2015)- for some social media marketing projects, the assignment itself directly impacted career prospects (Bacile, 2013; McCorkle & Payan, 2017).

Technical and practice-based marketing courses, such as social media marketing or digital marketing, necessitate hands-on projects for students to acquire the skills of critical thinking and problem-solving (Payne et al., 2011). Experiential projects allow students to learn by doing (Payne et al., 2011). Students actively engage with the material by linking course concepts to practice and should iteratively reflect on their performance and adapt their strategies (Kolb, 1984; Atwong, 2015). In addition to building technical and professional marketing skills, researchers found students felt empowered by learning from each other (Laird-Magee, 2013), self-learning (McCorkle & Payan, 2017), and overcoming challenges (Cowley, 2017). Examples of hands-on experiential projects assigned in social media courses include a group project in which students created and promoted a video advertisement on YouTube (Payne et al., 2011), a group project in which students shared their knowledge about social media platforms on a class

wiki (Laird-Magee, 2013), a challenge for students to raise their Klout scores (Bacile, 2013), a project in which students created and promoted a professional online presence (Edmiston, 2014), a group project creating and driving traffic to a Facebook fan page for a company (Bal et al., 2015), a university marketing department social media take-over campaign (Atwong, 2015), a project publishing and promoting content on BuzzFeed.com (Cowley, 2017), an individual project developing a professional personal brand on Twitter (McCorkle & Payan, 2017), and a group project managing social media accounts for non-profits (Vinales & Harris, 2017).

The following paper details an individual project implemented in a 35-student social media marketing class at a small, private, Catholic university in the Mid-Atlantic Region of the United States in the fall of 2018.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The social media marketing class project directed students to act as micro-influencers by building an online personal brand.

Micro-Influencers

Micro-influencers are online personalities with between 5,000 to 100,000 followers on a social media platform (Odell, 2019; Kemp et al., 2019). Micro-influencers are sponsored by brands to promote their products through word of mouth on the micro-influencer's personal social media vehicles (Hughes et al., 2019). They earn about \$500 for a single social media post to longer-term, more lucrative ambassadorships (Kombol, 2018). Micro-influencers implement influencer marketing strategies, which is rapidly becoming popular as a way to promote brands and products through social media personalities (Kemp et al., 2019). Micro-influencers have smaller audiences than traditional celebrities, however, studies show they have a large influence over their followers (Odell, 2019). Consumers are influenced by micro-influencers, because they seem more trustworthy, relatable, and authentic than traditional celebrities, and followers feel a close connection and relationship to micro-influencers (Breves et al., 2019). Influencer marketing is a type of native advertising, because sponsored posts seamlessly fit with micro-influencers' digital narratives (Breves et al., 2019). The impact of influencer marketing is staggering for both consumers and micro-influencers, and brands. Of consumers following micro-influencers, two-thirds made purchases based on their posts, influencer marketing advertisement spending is expected to top \$10 billion by 2022, half of micro-influencers intend to be full-time influencers, half of micro-influencers collaborate with less than ten brands, and half of micro-influencers spend more than five hours per day on social media (Odell, 2019). Instagram is currently the most popular social media vehicle for influencers, often linked to longer-format blogs or vlogs (Kombol, 2018).

While students were not expected to actually become micro-influencers during the course of the six-week project, they were expected to build a micro-influencer-style personal brand. Acting as a micro-influencer is not very far-fetched, because at the time of the project, the professor had several students working as successful micro-influencers in other marketing classes. Additionally, several students were offered brand ambassadorships, social media internships, or created micro-influencing careers based on the project.

Personal Branding

Personal branding involves using branding strategies and tactics to manage one's reputation (Edmiston, 2014). According to Peters, who coined the term personal branding, "to be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You" (1997, p. 4). In essence, personal branding encompasses identifying and expressing one's own unique attributes to create a cohesive, professional narrative (Busch & Davis, 2018). Personal branding projects are employed in social media marketing courses as an exercise in preparing students for success on the job market (Edmiston, 2014).

Personal branding was used for this social media marketing project not strictly for job market preparation, but for experimenting with and applying social media marketing principles. The primary purpose was for students to have complete control in building a brand on social media platforms with the secondary purpose of helping students practice managing their online impressions. In an earlier iteration of the course in the fall of 2015, more emphasis was placed on creating a traditional career-focused professional brand using LinkedIn, however, this did not reflect the integrated nature of people's professional and personal lives on social media, and restricted student creativity. For the project discussed subsequently, influencer marketing and personal branding served as foundational concepts to frame the students' approach.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The project was called the "Personal Branding Project" and it was worth 20% of the students' overall grade. The instructions in the syllabus stated that students would create and implement their own social media strategy, and build and monitor their digital identity. Students had to express their personal brand through both a short-form social media vehicle (such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, etc.) linked to a long-form social media vehicle (such as a blog or vlog). Students launched their personal brand in the fifth week of class and were required to spend six weeks posting to their accounts and monitoring their brands using concepts from the textbook to guide their decisions. Their deliverable was six weekly diary entries to the class's Slack channel reflecting on their strategic decisions and results. During the fourth week of the project, students were assigned a 'feedback buddy' to provide them with a compliment and a critique of their personal brand.

Prior to launching their personal brand, they were asked to spend several weeks doing background work to help choose their theme, social media handle, domain URL, relevant hashtags, values they wanted to portray, and accounts they should follow. They were encouraged to ask themselves the questions posed on page 50 of their textbook to help them formulate the theme of their personal brand: 1) "What goal do you want to accomplish?"; 2) "What do you want to be known for?"; 3) "What groups and people are active in your desired field and which social media channels do they use?"; 4) "What can you do to communicate your desired social brand identity while also differentiating yourself from others?"; and 5) "What visual elements will support the image you want to establish?" (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). The first weekly entry was expected to describe their answers to these questions, as well as explain their choices of themes, social media vehicles, handles, domain URLs, etc. The final diary entry was expected to summarize their key takeaways, lessons-learned, and overall feedback on the assignment. Other than regularly posting content to two types of social media vehicles and the expectations for these entries and the additional 'feedback buddy' entry, students were given complete freedom in implementing the project.

As mentioned earlier, the project described in this paper is the second iteration of the personal branding project. To develop the project, the professor reviewed influencer marketing, personal branding, social media marketing, and social media marketing education literature, along with a syllabus search of other social media marketing classes. To prepare for the course, the professor created and ran several social media accounts and blogs to test the strategies and tactics recommended by the textbook.

IMPLEMENTATION

Blogs

The purpose of requiring a long-format social media vehicle, such as a blog, was to give the students experience building a website, creating content, and implementing strategies and tactics from their textbook related to social publishing (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). For example, creating meaningful content and linking blogs to social media accounts should drive traffic both ways. All students chose blogs rather than vlogs (such as YouTube) for their long-format social media vehicle. Students created their blogs using free website platforms, such as Wordpress, Blogspot, and Wixsite. Some students used their names as part of their domain URL, while others followed the recommendation of the textbook to include words relating to their theme (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). The topics for themes chosen ranged from fashion/makeup, news, sports, travel/destination, pets, music, photography, hobbies, food, and female empowerment. The students all put in quite a bit of effort designing their blogs to fit aesthetically with their themes. For students with well-developed themes, the long-format of the blog offered them the opportunity to expand on the short captions of their Instagram page or the word count restrictions of their Twitter page. Some students posted detailed tutorials, reviews, and advice columns, interviewed others to feature on their blogs, or created whimsical narratives of their experiences. Students less strategic in developing their themes struggled to expand upon the short-format of their other social media platforms. For example, a student who branded herself as an expert in axolotls, an exotic amphibian, wrote a detailed blog on their care and keeping, whereas a student posting cute pictures of his family dog to his Instagram page struggled to develop a long-format narrative. In other words, the more background work the student put in regarding their choice of theme, the better developed their blog.

Social Media

The short-format social media vehicles allowed students to execute their influencer strategy daily. They segmented, targeted, and interacted with social media consumers, and built social communities, created and promoted content, and some even engaged in social commerce (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). Students could strategically choose any free social media vehicle, such as Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, or Instagram. They needed to keep their profiles public, so the professor and their classmates could see their posts. Of the 35 students in the class, one chose Pinterest, one chose Facebook, three chose Twitter, and the rest chose Instagram as their short-format social media vehicle. Most students chose Instagram to reach their targeted followers and because of the visual nature of their chosen themes. For example, the students found posting pictures of makeup and fashion looks were well received on Instagram. The student who chose Pinterest did so, because her theme was weddings. Her boards included titles, such as “The

Rustic Bride” and “The Modern Bride”. In her preparation for launching her personal brand, she found Pinterest to be the ideal vehicle for curating inspirational images of weddings. The student who chose Facebook was a student with autism, who already had a supportive following of family and friends interested in his inspirational local news stories. Facebook works well for influencers leveraging networks of family and friends. One student who chose Twitter posted fun facts about rock and roll music through different eras. Twitter was the ideal short-format vehicle for his theme, because Twitter is a micro-blog that connected him with a community of people with similar interests. Students chose to match their user names with their blog domain names. There were no requirements about how frequently students should post to their social media accounts, however, they were expected to follow the norms for the platform. For example, once per day is the generally accepted maximum number of posts for Instagram, while Twitter and Pinterest users posts much more frequently. Students, again, were given freedom in choosing the content they created, however, they were encouraged to try the strategies and tactics recommended by the textbook authors. For example, the textbook provides sample channel plans for each social media vehicle, giving detailed recommendations for the purpose, editorial plan, and measurement (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). The textbook also provides a “content value ladder” explaining the ideal mix of original content that students were encouraged to follow, such as filler and authority-building content (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 228). All channel plans advise linking content between social media vehicles to optimize reach (Tuten & Solomon, 2018), which was the impetus for requiring students to maintain both the long and short-format vehicles.

Slack Diary Entries

Slack is a free collaboration application that can be installed on desktops and mobile phones. A Slack ‘workspace’ was created for the course and students were added. Slack conversations are organized into ‘channels’ by using hashtags. The course Slack workspace was used for various course communication and collaboration, such as group activities, questions for the professor, introductions, and course news. It served a similar purpose to discussion boards found on most course management systems, however, Slack is much more user-friendly and nimble. The students posted their weekly diary entries in the #personalbranddiaries channel. All students could read and respond to others’ posts. The professor actively posed questions, offered suggestions, and commented on several reflection posts each week.

The students were given general instructions to post a weekly diary for six weeks, including an explanation of the decisions they made in the previous week, the strategic rationale for those decisions (supported by concepts from the textbook and other scholarly sources), an explanation of the results and performance of their decisions, and their overall reflection of the lessons learned that week. The posts were due before the start of class on Mondays, because students were most active in posting content to their social media accounts during the weekend. Students who felt ‘stuck’ about what to do were advised to follow along with the tactics covered in class each week. In the fourth week of the project, students were randomly paired with a ‘feedback buddy’ to provide an ungraded peer assessment. The students were directed to view each others’ social media vehicles, and post a compliment (What are their strengths?) and a critique (What is an opportunity for improvement?) to the Slack channel. This exercise allowed students to learn from each other and become more engaged with their classmates’ work. It bolstered interaction on the Slack channel and between student social media accounts during the

middle of the project. To encourage engagement further and reinforce learning course concepts, the professor asked the students to share some reflections during class at the beginning of each week. For example, the professor would ask questions, such as “Any #epicfails or #epicwins this week? Why? What tactics from this week’s topic do you plan to try? Any advice you need from your peers or advice you can give your peers?”. For their final diary entry, students were asked to provide additional feedback about their overall experience of the project. Those successes, challenges, and overall feedback are detailed in the next section.

Students could measure the performance of their decisions in many ways. They easily tracked likes, followers, and shares through the social media platform dashboards. Instagram business accounts are free and offer ‘insights’, which is a metrics dashboard not available to personal accounts. The insights dashboard displays profile visits, website clicks, e-mails, reach (number of unique accounts viewing posts), impressions (total number of times posts were seen), followers gained and lost, post likes, comments, and saves, average times of day followers are using Instagram, and others. The students using Instagram created business accounts for this added analytics capability. The free blog sites students created include metrics dashboards. For example, Wordpress’s free analytics are called ‘stats’, displaying views, visitors, likes, comments, downloads, clicks, referrers, posts, and countries. Using the free analytics dashboards provided by the social media platforms, students could assess the success of their content, the optimal times of day to post, and the appropriate frequency of posting.

The reflections of their decision-making process and the successes and challenges of their strategies and tactics provided evidence of student learning.

Assessment

The weekly Slack diary entries were assessed by the students’ ability to document strategic decisions informed by multiple sources of knowledge, the results of those decisions, and a reflection of the results. The professor emphasized that the ‘success’ of their social media vehicles, measured by followers, likes, shares, etc., had no bearing on their grade- it was the iterative process of learning through trial, error, and reflection that mattered.

To grade the projects, at the end of the six weeks, the professor scrolled through each student’s long and short-format vehicles, read each student’s reflection posts, and assigned a grade according to a rubric as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix). This took considerable time and effort, because each reflection post averaged 500-1,000 words. It was clear, however, from the vehicles and reflections, that the students earnestly tried different tactics, built original content, and learned from the process.

DISCUSSION

Successes

In their final diary entry, students detailed what drove their successes during the project. Many students struggled with their choice of theme, because they had difficulty articulating their strengths and interests others would connect with and find valuable. During the pre-launch phase of the project, the professor often pushed students to think about their own value proposition, which should be specific and differentiable. For example, a marketing and fashion merchandising double-major proposed a fashion-themed personal brand. The professor pushed

her to think about what her unique perspective and contribution would be to the world of online fashion. She eventually chose to style cozy and budget-friendly looks, posing in various autumnal-themed locations and linking each piece of clothing to used clothing retailers. She chose an honest and down-to-earth tone to reinforce that anyone can look good and feel good in used pieces. The more specific, unique, and conscientious students were in choosing their theme, the more other strategic decisions fell into place. Once the student knew she wanted to style cozy and budget-friendly looks, it was easy for her to choose a domain name (“cozyme”) and start creating relevant content.

Many students used analytics to their advantage. They explained finding that the timing of posts affected their impressions. Some students realized that their followers were scrolling through Instagram when they first wake up and before they go to bed, so those were optimal times to post. Others noticed posting on certain days of the week garnered more impressions. In addition to timing, students also noted choosing the appropriate frequency of posting for the social media vehicle and then consistently posting were important. In the excitement of launching her personal brand, one student posted more than five Instagram posts per day, but she soon realized one well-crafted post per day encouraged more interactions with followers (and was more manageable). The extra content she created was posted to her Instagram story. Other students worked diligently to create one post per week, or would post seven times in one week and once in the next. They realized that consistent posting activity helped them maintain followers, even if not every post was highly original.

To maximize reach and generate new followers, students found linking between accounts, tagging locations and other accounts, choosing trending hashtags, and using relevant keywords enhanced their social media efforts. These suggestions were all found in the textbook, however, the students said it took practice to optimize their keywords and hashtags (which met the objective of the project- students put social media marketing concepts into practice).

Engagement involves interacting with your social community. Students found it important not only to follow other accounts, but also to share posts, comment on others’ posts, and respond to comments on their posts. The more dynamic they were in engaging their community, the more members of their community followed, liked, commented, and shared content on their accounts.

Finally, students found that taking a personal tone helped them connect with their followers. Those who displayed emotion in their pictures and writing appealed to their followers. Students considered excitement to be a particularly effective emotional appeal.

Challenges

Every day in class students mentioned how surprisingly difficult they found the project. They stated that they underestimated how time consuming planning and content creation would be. They also underestimated how difficult it would be to create quality images and other aspects of content. To their credit, the students challenged themselves to put in the hard work necessary to get positive results. Through the project, student realized that successful, strategic social media marketing and influencer marketing is incredibly demanding. Prior to the project, the students’ only experience with social media was their personal use for entertainment and socializing. Micro-influencers and other social media celebrities appear to lead comfortable and glamorous lives. The project gave them experience in the hidden work of social media marketing.

Another set of challenges for students related to acquiring and maintaining followers. Many students began the project by encouraging their friends and family members to follow their accounts, however, to reach and acquire unknown followers, the students had to produce valuable content with the appropriate social media optimization tactics (such as choosing relevant hashtags). Students found they would acquire followers, but they quickly unfollowed. Students were encouraged to try to increase engagement to build a base of followers. One way to build engagement is to encourage comments and share, and to interact with followers and related accounts. Students had difficulty distinguishing between bots and genuine followers. Some tell-tale signs that a social media account is a bot, is following thousands of unrelated accounts without having many followers, creating little to no content, and writing the same irrelevant comments on others' posts. Students were advised to focus on building a base of valuable followers that would amplify their social media content and connect them with the social community, rather than worrying about bot behavior. For example, some students would interact with bots who commented on their posts or would agonize over bot accounts that unfollowed their social media account. Their time would have been better spent sharing posts and interacting with similar or aspirational social media accounts relevant to their theme. Some students were able to 'partner' with other social media accounts that would share their content and links.

Finally, students struggled with balancing the tone of their content. Successful micro-influencers adeptly balance authenticity and fantasy, intimacy and formality. Students found it challenging to be personal and honest, while also reinforcing their authority and expertise on their theme. Finding the right balance took time, trial, and error. Students used metrics to determine popular posts and that helped guide the style of their subsequent communication.

Feedback

In their overall feedback of their experience with the project, students frequently mentioned the word 'journey'. They felt the weekly diary reflections helped them process what they learned and stay engaged throughout the six-week project duration. Throughout their journey, students said they felt like their skills grew, and they were proud of what they accomplished. Students explained that learning to overcome adversity was powerful. The project offered students an opportunity to experiment and experience frustration and failure. They also thought it was fun to express themselves independently and creatively.

Students viewed the project as an opportunity to learn strategy, career-relevant skills, and the inner-workings of platforms usually hidden from their experience as social media users. Many students planned to work as social media marketers or digital strategists, so the project directly related to building experience necessary for job market and career success. They felt empowered to act as social media marketers while students and safe under the guidance of the professor.

CONCLUSION

This project, as an assignment for a social media marketing class, is recommended for professors desiring to give their students real, hands-on experience with social media marketing. Students develop and build their social media personas to act as influencers in their chosen social community. The iteration of the project described in this paper accomplished its purpose of directing students to put strategies and tactics into practice, learn through trial and error, learn

from each other, and learn from themselves. Students gained appreciation for the hard work it takes to professionally run social media accounts and they learned social media marketing principles by doing. They struggled to think strategically and they struggled with ‘putting themselves out there’. Reflecting on their experience each week helped frame the project as a journey to empower them.

Every assignment needs evaluation and calibration every iteration. The project described in this paper was the second iteration. For the second iteration, weekly Slack diary entries were added rather than the professor observing student social media accounts alone, the students were given total freedom in choosing their themes rather than themes needing to be job market-preparation-focused, the students chose one long and one short-format social media vehicle rather than LinkedIn and one additional short-format vehicle, and the project was more influencer marketing inspired rather than career services inspired. These changes vastly improved the student experience, however, there is still room for improvement. The projects were difficult to grade, given the volume of Slack posts and social media posts. Ideally, a smaller class size would be more manageable. Another strategy to consider would be graded peer assessment of personal brand diary reflection posts to take some grading pressure off the professor. Throughout the duration of the project, students need constant problem-solving, feedback, and advice from the professor as issues arise. This places a burden on the professor to have experience with personal branding and influencer marketing, so professors should practice with different types of social media accounts in preparation for delivering the class (if they do not have industry experience). Given the importance of the journey to student learning and the time and effort it takes to build a base of followers and content, another consideration is to extend the six week project to a semester-long project. The students in this class were assigned a semester-long group project in which they developed social media marketing plans for local non-profits. It was difficult for students to juggle both projects effectively, and they may have accomplished more if they focused solely on the personal branding project. Some students struggled with the unstructured nature of this project, and they may have benefitted from guidance in which strategies and tactics to apply each week. This would be a tradeoff for the creativity, independence, and learning from trial and error students experienced. Finally, while students received internship and job offers based on the work they did for this project, some students frivolously chose their themes. Professors might consider setting more career-minded parameters.

This project was designed to teach Generation Z students social media marketing principles within their own culture. Ultimately, students appreciated the powerful and engaging experience of spending six weeks cultivating their personal brand.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Rubric.

| A | B | C | D | F |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| Weekly diary entries thoroughly document strategic decisions informed by multiple sources of knowledge, the results of those decisions, and a reflection of the results. | Weekly diary entries document strategic decisions informed by multiple sources of knowledge, the results of those decisions, and a reflection of the results. | Weekly diary entries document strategic decisions informed by a single source of knowledge, the results of those decisions, and a reflection of the results. | Weekly diary entries show minimal strategic decision-making, little monitoring of results, and superficial reflection. | Irregular diary entries or diary entries consisting of little value. |