

Why brands are turning away from big Instagram influencers to work with people who have small followings instead

Rachel Hosie Apr 9, 2019, 3:54 PM



Amber Atherton is the founder of Zyper, which finds a brand's top 1% of fans, regardless of follower count. Zyper

- Brands are increasingly moving away from working with huge influencers to promote their products.

have as few as 100 followers.

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The life of an influencer can appear incredibly glamorous — who wouldn't want to spend their days posing for photos, receiving gifts from brands, and being paid to post about them on Instagram?

It's a lifestyle that appeals to many, so much so that "social-media influencer" is the second most popular career aspiration among those between the ages of 11 and 16 (second only to "doctor"), according to an [Awin study](#).

With certain influencers commanding followings into the millions, securing an endorsement from one can seem like an incredibly powerful move for a brand.

However, the tide is slowly turning, and brands are increasingly seeing the benefits of working with micro- or nano-influencers — meaning it's actually possible work with your favourite brands, even if you have only a few hundred followers.

What is a micro-influencer?

The term "micro-influencer" is bandied around a lot, but what it describes exactly is up for debate.

While some people would consider anyone with 1,000 to 10,000 followers a micro-influencer, and anyone with more than that to be an influencer, others break things down more thoroughly.

Gabby Wickham and Shirley Leigh-Wood Oakes are the cofounders of the London-based brand-influence agency [WickerWood](#), which plays the role of middleman

They divide influencers into the following categories:

- Macro: 200,000 to 900,000 followers
- Midi: 50,000 to 200,000 followers
- Micro: 10,000 to 50,000 followers
- Nano: 800 to 10,000 followers.

Why do brands want to work with micro-influencers?

It might seem counterintuitive for a company wanting to boost sales and increase brand awareness to choose to work with influencers with small followings, but there's actually a whole host of reasons to do so.

For starters, people with a few thousand followers generally seem more trustworthy, authentic, and relatable than those with huge followings.

Working with smaller influencers can also mean a brand's message is spread in a more natural-feeling way.

"It's really trusted and curated content," Wickham told INSIDER. "[Working with micro-influencers] is one of the strongest marketing platforms of the moment."

Read more: *I went on a professional Instagram photoshoot, and the lengths influencers go to for the perfect picture will shock you*

What's more, nano- and micro-influencers often allow a brand to target specific audiences — if, say, you were opening a restaurant in north London, working with micro-influencers who post about their adventures in the area would likely increase

"A lot of brands prefer to work with nano- or micro-influencers because they're a lot

"It means the potential engagement is a lot stronger because those influencers will be much more aware and in tune with their immediate following because they've grown them, they're still small enough for them to be able to engage well with and also potentially know on some level.

The 25-year-old London-based food blogger Nina Ricafort, for example, has 10,600 followers on her Instagram account @feastlondon.



feastlondon
Cheeky Burger

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332 likes
feastlondon

[invite] Treated to an absolute feast at award-winning Cheeky Burger the other week. We tried the Hot Daddy (with chipotle sauce and jalapeño jam), the W12 (with seared foie gras and onion compote), and my personal favourite — the Cheeky Elvis. If you’ve never tried a burger with peanut butter, please go to Cheeky Burger and order this ASAP! It worked SO well with the juicy patty, smoked bacon and homemade mayo 🍴 A winning combination of flavours (ironically not pictured here though, these are the other 2 burgers! 🍴)

☆ 8/10 🍴 Burgers from £7 to £9
🍴 W12 Studios White City, London

Her feed is dedicated to reviews of dishes and restaurants found in central London,

"They'll be much more London-centric and locally focused because of the work they've



WickerWood cofounders Gabby Wickham and Shirley Leigh-Wood Oakes. Sam Churchill

Companies are seeking genuine brand fans

No matter the size of your following, and despite the inclusion of #ad, #gifted, or #spon in your caption, product endorsements on Instagram are a lot more powerful when the person doing the promoting is a genuine fan of the brand.

This is something Amber Atherton, the founder of a tool called [Zyper](#), realized while running a jewellery e-commerce business.

"We learned our customers were our most relevant ambassadors," Atherton told INSIDER. "Tapping into fans of a brand is far more powerful than using an influencer."



Atherton. Zyper

This was the seed that led to her founding [Zyper](#), which uses a secret algorithm to identify a brand's top 1% of fans and then brings the two together on projects.

"It's the idea that influencers are becoming less and less relevant, and every consumer has the power to collaborate with a brand that they love," Atherton said. "We're like a hybrid loyalty programme, it's about rewarding genuine fans as opposed to just paying people to post."



thefitlondoner

London, United Kingdom

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2,763 likes

thefitlondoner

SWIPEE FOR THE MELT ➡!!! ☐

...And here it is! What a beauty 😊😊😊😊

So here we have...

☐☐ 55g oats, 250ml cashew milk, 1/4 grated courgette, 25g @myproteinuk strawberry cream impact whey protein

☐☐☐

.....

Then I topped the whole thing with a banana ☐ and a square of @tescofood dark choc with orange ☐☐ (THE BEST MELT!)

Pls sir can I have some more ☐

HAPPY HUMPS DAY DEERSLO

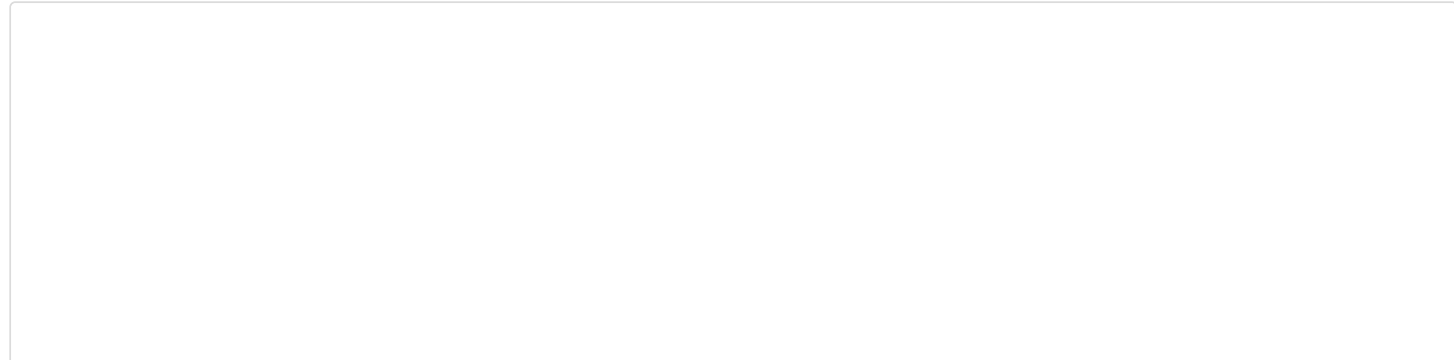
One of the problems with working with huge influencers is that you don't really know who you're reaching.

"With macro- and mega-influencers, it's like throwing sand at a wall," Wickham said. "It's a numbers game, rather than really curating."

What's more, the biggest influencers have become celebrities in their own right, which makes them not seem like real people any more.

"Some of these much bigger ones with half a million or a million followers, they feel a little out of touch or seem to have propelled themselves into the celebrity space," Leigh-Wood Oakes said.

"So consumers and followers start to see the dollar signs behind that, they're turning into a business, probably being paid a hell of a lot," she added.



Instagram

The link to this photo or video may be broken, or the post may have been removed.

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Even though a micro- or nano-influencers might have received something for free, they certainly won't have been paid the huge amounts mega-influencers receive for their endorsements. The general public is also becoming more savvy to how sizeable these fees can be — and it's a turnoff.

"People want authentic content, and it becomes really disingenuous if you realise someone is paid £10,0000 (\$13,000) to do it," Wickham said.

Read more: [Instagram influencers are hiring life coaches to help them deal with the pressures of the platform](#)

All of these factors have contributed to a general decline in trust of big influencers, and Atherton said the data backs this up.

peer-to-peer referral," Atherton added. "I think the whole influencer space is a massive bubble which is going to burst."

How micro-influencers are selected

If the big influencer space has become overcrowded, there are, of course, even more potential micro- and nano-influencers on Instagram, so how do agencies and brands decide who to work with?

For WickerWood, it's a case of considering analytics but also a person's content creation — that means not only whether what you're posting has been thoughtfully created but also whether it aligns with the brand's image.

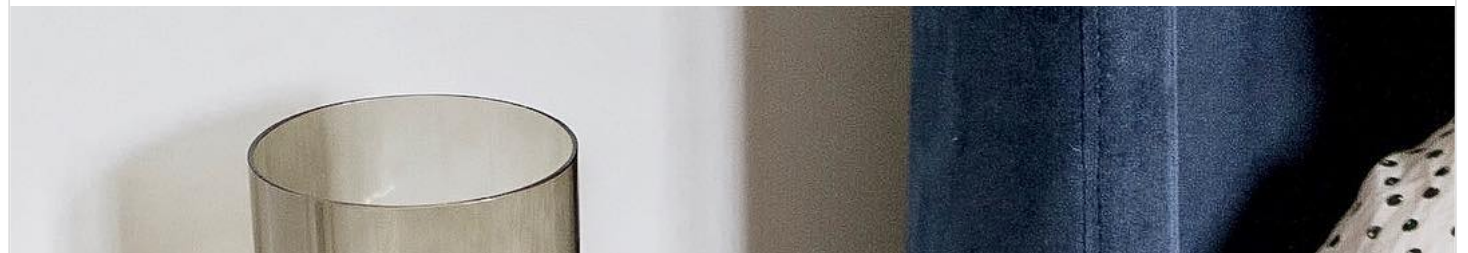
From a personal point of view, you won't be doing yourself any favours by endorsing a product that doesn't fit seamlessly into your Instagram.

"Followers are so much more savvy than they were before, and if it doesn't look real, and it doesn't look like it is part of your world and you would endorse it, there's no point in doing it," Leigh-Wood Oakes said.

"The influencer should want to work with brands that work with their lifestyle because otherwise their followers are just going to get turned off," she added.



butterfly_robyn
1,018 followers

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189 likes
butterfly_robyn

{gifted products} How was your day today ☐? I’m making egg fried rice for tea and you bet I’m excited ☐ I’m also online shopping this evening and on the look out to try some new makeup

"They have to have the right metrics to have 1% fan status," Atherton said. "That's how we confirm someone is a real brand advocate — it's obviously completely different to influencers, which just comes down to brands choosing different people who'll promote tons of different brands if they're paid."

The size of a person's following doesn't actually come into it at all, and there's no minimum number of followers you have to have to become a brand fan: "It's a completely artificial way to determine if somebody is relevant to a brand or in any way influential within their peer group," Atherton said.

"We generally don't look at that as a defining metric at all," she added.

Read more: [Instagram posts encouraging eating disorders are 'spiralling out of control,' psychiatrists warn](#)

While Zyper tends to approach the top 1% of fans on social media after identifying them, they also receive applications from people, who are often enticed by the prospect of freebies.

Since launching a year and a half ago, Zyper has had hundreds of thousands of applications from people who want to be brand fans, but the vast majority get turned down if they don't come up in the company's data deep dive.

"So if you wanted to work with Topshop, we take a deep dive and then match that up with our inbound signup list and see if those people are actually coming up in the top 1%," Atherton said. "A lot of the time they're not."

What does being a micro-influencer entail?

Zyper works with brands such as Magnum, L'Oréal, and Dior, but how it works with influencers varies.

Usually, once the top 1% of fans have been identified, and they've agreed to be involved, they'll be given credit to spend on the brand in some capacity and be asked to feature it in posts a certain number of times per month (disclosing that the products were gifted).



gabriellarose_h
Leeds

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283 likes
gabriellarose_h

Mixing up prints with one of my fave @topshop skirts (gifted)... I've felt like I've hit a bit of a brick wall lately with everything, my clothes, my style, my creativity but finally I think my mojo is back

said. "It's a very lean feedback group for insights."

Zyper then feeds the data back to its brands: For example, if 50% of a beauty brand's fans have made Instagram posts about something matcha-related over the past three months, this might result in the brand considering bringing out a matcha line of products, or even just giving out matcha kits to fans as a reward.

How to make yourself more attractive to brands

So you've got a small but engaged following on Instagram and want to get a slice of the micro-influencer action — how do you go about it?

Ultimately, you need to wait for a brand or agency to come to you, but there are certain ways you can increase your chances of this happening, Leigh-Wood Oakes said.

1. Understand yourself as a brand

Ask yourself: What's your ethos as a social-media influencer? What do you want to tell your followers? What lifestyle are you trying to promote? Make sure this comes across strongly through your posts.

2. Be real

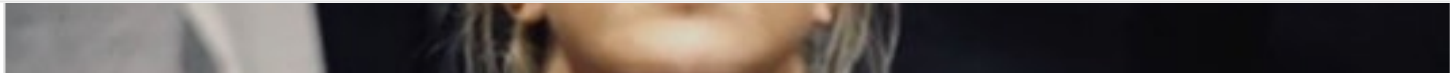
"A lot of brands are starting to work a lot less with influencers who Photoshop too much, use loads of filters, and give off this idea that life is perfect and wonderful, and there's not a pimple or a dimple in sight — it's not real life," Leigh-Wood Oakes said.

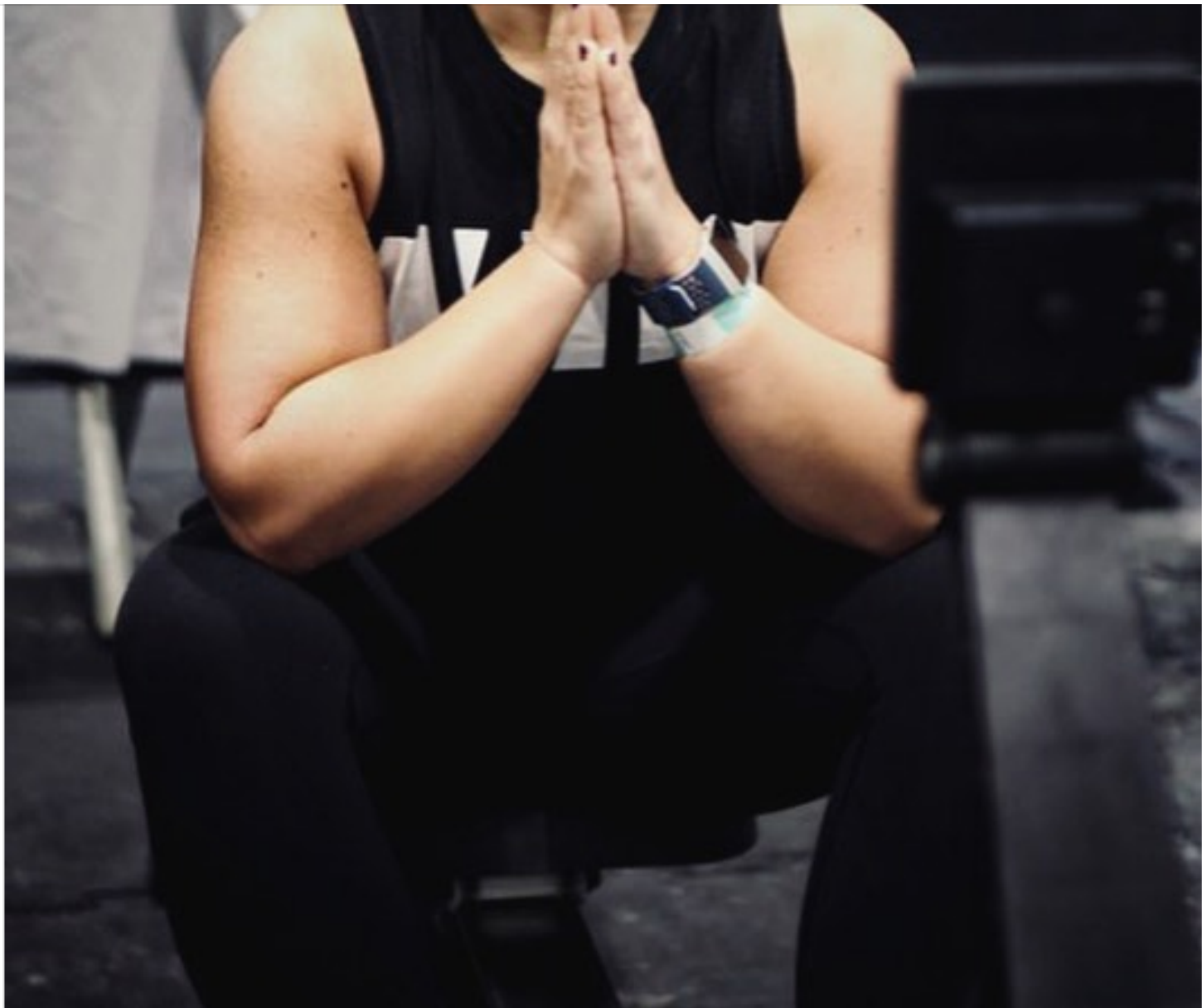
"So I would definitely suggest an influencer make sure they are really showing real life. Yes, it can be curated and tailored, but you have a responsibility, and that's very key,"



laurabiceps
41.5k followers

View Profile





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3. Put effort into your content

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producing.

...of ideas and creative input, Leigh-Wood Oakes said.

4. Know your audience

If you want your audience to engage with you, you need to engage with them, and this is how you'll get to know them.

"Really understanding and being OK with having a small audience following is crucial," Leigh-Wood Oakes said.

You just need to demonstrate you know how to engage that audience successfully.

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