



# POWERFUL CONNECTIONS

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2017 REPORT

ALLISON+  
PARTNERS





A person is shown in silhouette, looking out of a window. The background is a blurred view of a sunset or sunrise over a body of water, with warm orange and yellow light reflecting on the surface. The person's hand is near their face, possibly resting their chin on it.

How Influence,  
Empathy and  
Engagement have  
Transformed Cause  
in the Digital Era

# IN A TIME OF INTENSE SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND GLOBAL CHANGE, WE SEE THE POWER, POTENTIAL AND PITFALLS OF DIGITAL INFLUENCE IN WAYS THAT FEW COULD HAVE IMAGINED.

As organizations around the world scramble to capture the increasingly taxed attention of audiences, they find their competition extends far beyond their traditional competitors. Today, everyone from global brands to global leaders look for strategic digital linchpins whose credibility and audiences can be leveraged either to positively shape beliefs or inspire action. At times, this is done authentically and masterfully. At others, it is obvious and heavy-handed. One thing is certain: the stakes and possibilities for digital influence have been raised almost beyond measure.

In the cause space, harnessing the power of digital marketing to raise awareness and develop deeper connectivity with consumers has become a marketing staple for brands and nonprofits alike. What better way to instantly connect people with a call to action to make a difference and empower them to spread messages broadly? But with the rise of digital influencers, or those who have online followers due to the perceived value of their content rather than any offline connection, the digital landscape has become more

complicated for marketers. While potentially powerful allies, does leveraging their influence and reach actually strengthen the efficiency and results of cause marketing efforts?

In this Influence Impact Report by Allison+Partners, we explore what has fundamentally changed — and what has remained constant — in the rapidly, pivoting realm of digital influence and stakeholder engagement.

## SOME OF THE REPORT'S REVELATIONS INCLUDE:

- + Successful cause marketing requires deployment of influencer strategy to drive donations and advocacy.
  - + Generation X and Millennials are not only embracing the principles of cause, but also expecting evidence and transparency from the brands they support.
  - + A top-down, celebrity-focused view of influencer marketing may undermine credibility if not done authentically, while an empathy-driven, emotional plea from the most unlikely of influencers may spark extraordinary results.
  - + Consumers are more likely to support cause campaigns with donations or engagement if triggered by influencers who have personally been touched by the issue or cause.
  - + When developing trust in cause relationships, consumers look for real messages from individuals who have been touched by the brand's efforts.
- For brands and nonprofits alike, this report is a must-read assessment of cause marketing and influence in the digital era, and how the precise deployment of both drive win-win results many organizations try to attain.

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## DEFINING THE TERMS

### CAUSE MARKETING

A marketing, communications or public relations initiative defined by the cooperative and collaborative efforts between a nonprofit organization and a for-profit business for mutual benefit.

### DIGITAL INFLUENCERS

Individuals and entities that consumers follow digitally and socially, but do not know personally or interact with offline.



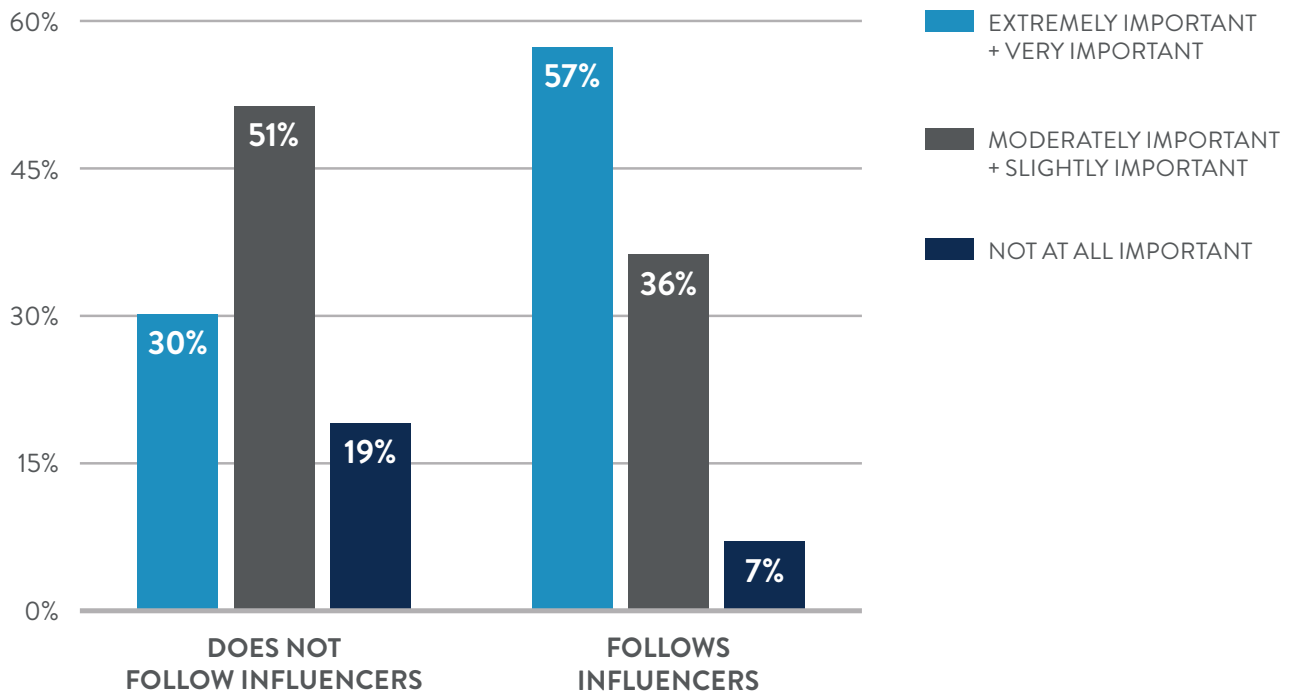


An aerial photograph showing a group of cyclists riding on a cobblestone street. The cyclists are wearing various colored jerseys and helmets, and their shadows are cast on the pavement. The street is made of light-colored cobblestones arranged in a grid pattern.

# FOLLOWERS CARE ABOUT AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS TO A CAUSE

According to the study, 30 percent of individuals who follow digital influencers said a brand's charitable partnerships are "extremely important" to them, compared to just nine percent of those who do not follow digital influencers. In addition, 75 percent of followers rated a brand being purpose-driven as "extremely/very important," and 57 percent are also more likely to say brand and cause partnerships are "extremely/very important" than non-followers.

## IMPORTANCE OF A BRAND'S CAUSE PARTNERSHIP BY INFLUENCER STATUS



Significantly, this dynamic is not driven by an audience judging and evaluating a brand's social commitment from afar. More than 52 percent of followers have tried a product due to information provided by an influencer or their recommendation, and an additional 25 percent say they are open to doing so. This means nearly 80 percent self-identify as potentially willing to try or switch brands because of an influencer's feedback.

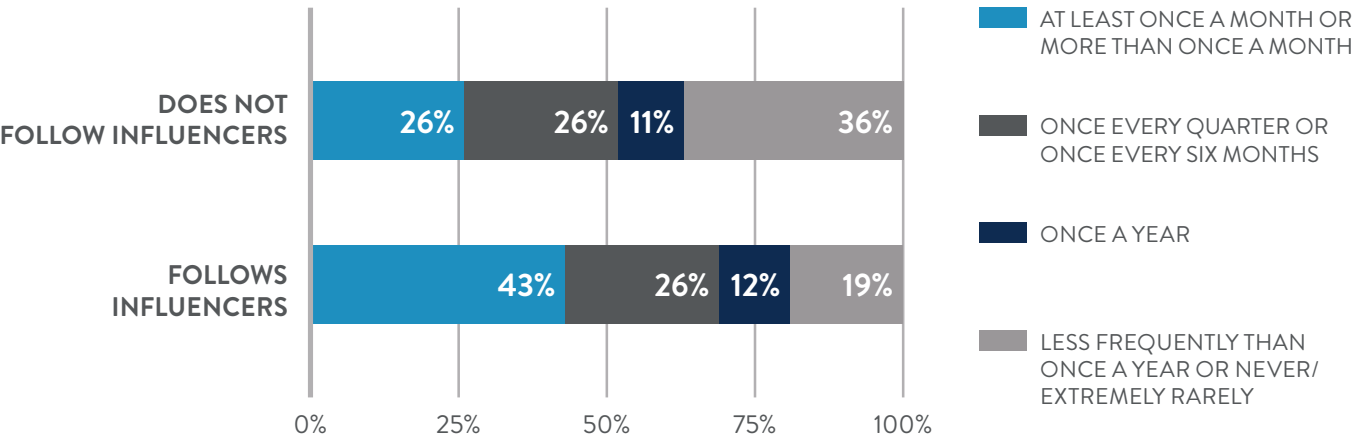
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Data also reveal a strong correlation between those who follow digital influencers and their passion for a cause: 43 percent of followers engage with cause at least once a month, compared to only 26 percent of those who do not follow digital influencers. This audience is open uniquely to influencers they trust, and energized to act on that influence with their money, time and loyalty. Not surprisingly, younger generations (i.e. Gen Z and Millennials) are particularly willing to engage with cause campaigns, with 38 percent of Gen Z and 34 percent of Millennials volunteering or donating at least once a month.

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INFLUENCER AND CAUSE ENGAGEMENT CORRELATION



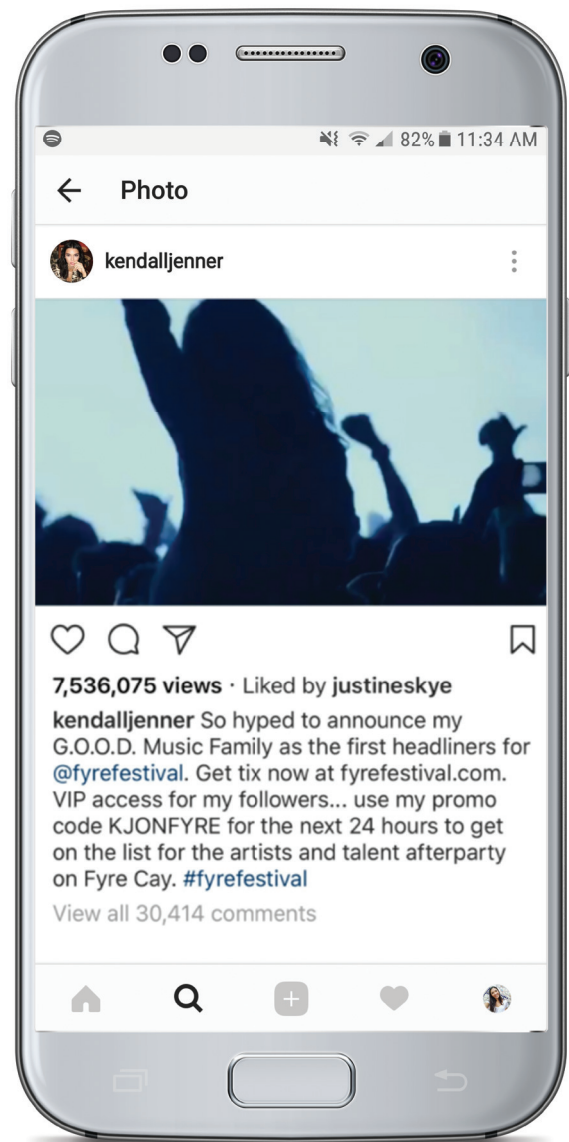


Yet, the underlying veracity of brand and nonprofit partnerships is not something consumers will always accept at face value. That is the challenge with today's hyperconnected, digitally savvy and highly engaged audiences — They are hyperconnected, digitally savvy and highly engaged. They are also cautious, conscientious and careful about the issues and causes they champion, and are rightly suspicious and intuitive about authenticity. Their deep digital fluency allows them to recognize the transactional reality of paid influence and the social stars who are more than happy to exchange access to audience for payments and perks.

Take, for instance, the recent failure of Fyre Festival. The “organizers” of the beyond-disorganized luxury music festival in the Bahamas reportedly paid Kendall Jenner \$250,000 for a single promotional Instagram post.

Not only did paying her and other digital influencers to promote the event make a significant business impact on the ticket packages that ran upwards of \$100,000, but it was also certainly money that could have been better spent on such high-end luxury items as toilets, food, water and shelter for guests who arrived expecting their own private Ibiza and not a refugee camp for the wealthy victims of a poorly executed event.

In the end, the credibility of the digital influencers involved was tarnished, and their followers were put on high alert to the reality of their potentially unauthentic endorsements.



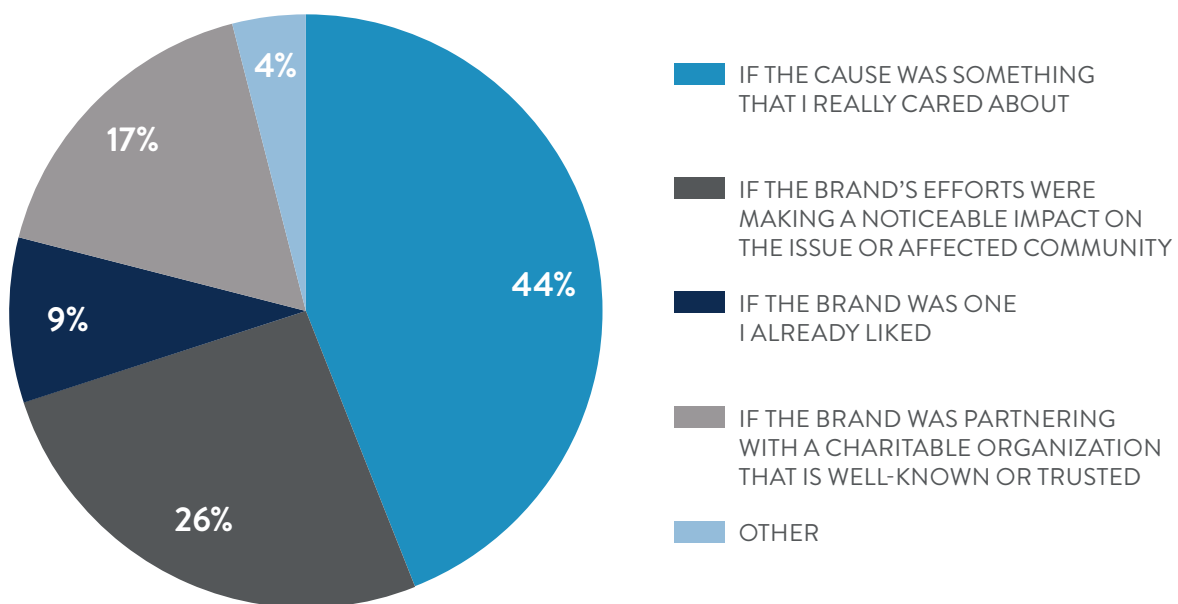
Credit: Kendall Jenner

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## REASONS CONSUMERS SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT A BRAND'S CAUSE PARTNERSHIP OR ACTIVITIES



# THE NOTORIETY OF THE CHARITY DOESN'T MATTER, BUT THE PEOPLE IT TOUCHES DO

When asked what would inspire them to share information about a brand's cause partnership or cause activities, most respondents (44 percent) said they would share information "If the cause was something that I really cared about." At the bottom of the list (nine percent) was, "If the brand was partnering with a charitable organization that is well-known or trusted." This could be a cue for brands to reassess the power of partnering with just big names over selecting causes that are closer to the hearts of their target customers or that more closely align with the brand's positioning.

For many years, numerous brands partnered with well-known breast cancer charities that have done tremendous work raising awareness and millions of dollars for research and treatment. However, several years into these initiatives, partnerships that were built didn't necessarily make sense. The term "pink-washing" (i.e. if the product carried a pink ribbon without a clear connection to the cause) was born, and some brands were criticized for leveraging an important cause just to market products to a female demographic. Similarly, influencers who are tapped to support cause campaigns shouldn't be sought after just because they reach a core target demographic; they should be considered based on their

connectivity with the cause or issue. Their followers will not always support a brand's cause campaign unless it's authentic to both the brand and its influencers. For example, Robin Roberts, a host on Good Morning America, has battled breast cancer and is a two-time cancer survivor. She is an authentic spokesperson given her experience and organic connection to the cause, and has leveraged her visibility to support organizations such as Stand Up to Cancer.

In addition to ensuring an authentic connection to the cause it champions, a brand must also be sure to focus on the actual people impacted by the issue. According to the study, more than half of respondents (53.4%) said hearing messages from individuals touched by the cause was 'extremely/very important' to deciding whether to trust a cause/brand partnership. Without these very important people, the cause campaign is empty, and resembles two stars in a movie with no characters or plot. They are critical catalysts of engagement, and a decisive factor in helping audiences determine whether to trust a cause partnership. More significantly, they are an important reason why people decide to contribute their time, money and resources.



# PERSONAL STORIES DRIVE ENGAGEMENT

Once marketers have an authentic cause to support and have connected with those impacted, it is vital to focus on the type of content, narratives and storytelling that will inspire audiences.

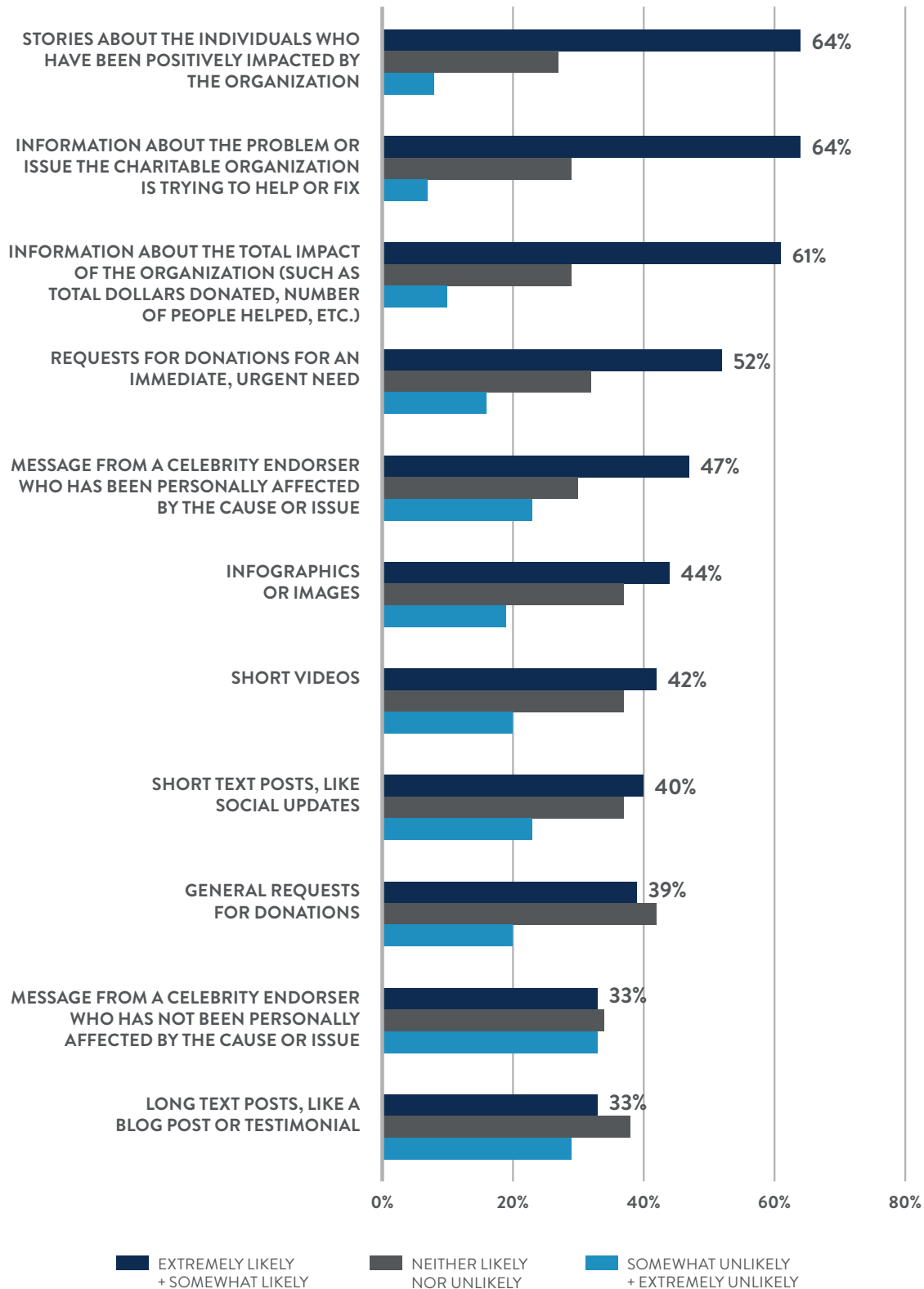
The data reveal personal stories of everyday people supported by the cause have far more reach and power than even celebrity or name recognition of the brand and organization. While social media is assumed to be just that — social interaction — it is often an activity that occurs in isolation: one person at a screen developing a “message in a bottle.” It is the power of “the feels,” the outpouring of empathy that can be triggered by well-crafted and simply executed communication that tells a compelling story and reveals deeper human truths.

When asked about the types of content they would share from a nonprofit, most respondents (64 percent) were either “extremely likely” or “somewhat likely” to share stories about individuals who have been positively impacted by the organization. This was followed very closely by information about the problem or issue the charitable organization is trying to help or fix (64 percent). At 61 percent, the third-most popular option was information about the total amount of impact by the organization, such as total dollars donated or number of people helped. Content least likely to be shared included a message from a celebrity endorser who has not been affected personally by the cause or issue (33 percent), general requests for donations (39 percent) and long text posts, such as a blog or testimonial (33 percent).

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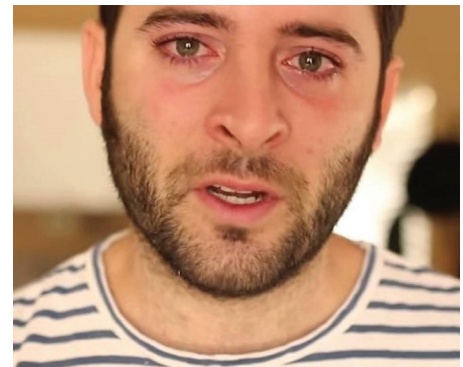
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## LIKELIHOOD OF SHARING THIS TYPE OF CONTENT FROM A CHARITABLE ORGANIZATION



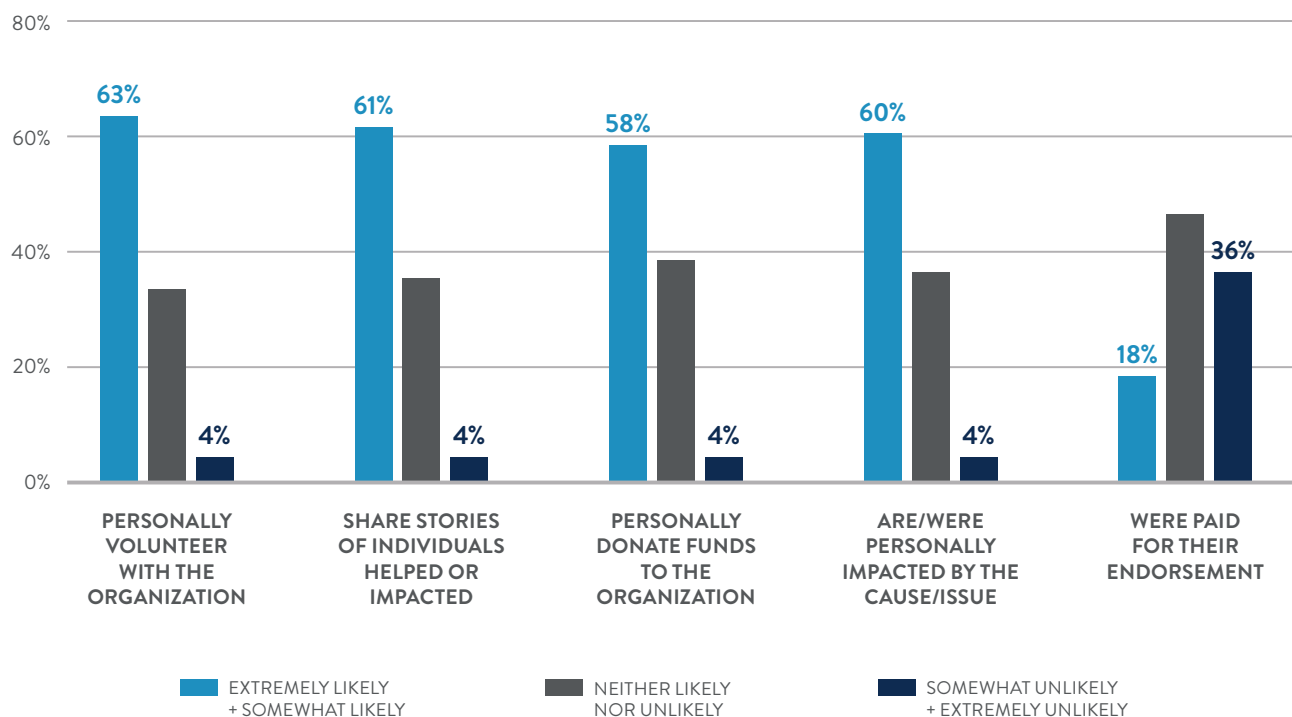
Anthony Carbajal, a photographer in Southern California, was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The “Ice Bucket Challenge” began and, like many, Carbajal thought the challenge would disappear quickly. When it didn’t, he decided to post a video of his experience. Striking a good balance of being funny, informative and serious, the video was extremely personal and authentic. He shared his recent diagnosis with ALS, and how his grandmother and mother also had the disease. It was picked up organically by Upworthy.com and then by media outlets across the globe. With more than 20 million views across different platforms, his video helped raise millions of dollars for the ALS Therapy Development Institute’s Precision Medicine Program.

While the authenticity of the person delivering the message is critical, the personal connection to the cause of the influencer sharing the message is equally important. An influencer who volunteers personally with an organization was most likely to inspire trust in their recommendation, followed by an influencer who shared stories of others who have been helped or impacted by the charity or cause. If the influencer has been impacted personally by the cause in question, that is also likely to inspire trust.



Credit: Anthony Carbajal

## WHAT INSPIRES TRUST IN INFLUENCERS







Credit: ABC

## THE KIMMEL TEST: EMPATHY AND THE POWER OF UNEXPECTED INFLUENCE

While celebrity can be a poor proxy for real emotional connection, it is certainly possible to combine both authentically. Often, the results are extraordinarily powerful, with an ability to galvanize influence that is as impactful as it is unexpected.

On May 1, 2017, Jimmy Kimmel, host of the late-night talk show Jimmy Kimmel Live, used his opening monologue to tell a stunning and heart-wrenching story about the birth of his son. While it appeared to be an easy and normal delivery, the nurses noticed the baby had a heart murmur, and immediately transferred him to Children's Hospital in Los Angeles. During his deeply personal, tearful and authentic monologue, Kimmel praised the hospital for saving his son's life and shined the light on the expertise and quality of care offered by the organization. In that moment, he was not only highly influential, he became an unlikely spokesperson for Children's Hospital Los Angeles. In the following three days, Children's Hospital Los Angeles received

thousands of donations, catapulted over the 100,000-follower mark on Facebook and was contacted by dozens of companies making donations in honor of Jimmy's son including a large gift of more than \$500,000. The monologue has been viewed more than 10.5 million times on YouTube and his friend, Ellen DeGeneres, created a prizeo.com crowdsourcing fundraiser that she discussed on her show raising thousands of additional dollars for the hospital. Though Kimmel's access to such a rare and extraordinary media platform — his own television show — certainly factored in to the effects of his story, the power and poignancy that moved millions came not from his celebrity, but from his vulnerability, honesty and deep personal connection.

# CERTAIN CHANNELS MATTER MORE

Often, the amplification of cause messaging centers around its ability to raise awareness of the campaign, the brand and the nonprofit. A review of the data reveal successful, insight-driven amplification can not only drive awareness, but also increase donations and personal engagement — particularly when combined with influence.

Of those who follow digital influencers, 35 percent said they have engaged with a cause due to a digital influencer and an additional 31 percent were more open to it after hearing from them. Of those engaged with a cause, 52 percent shared awareness about the cause, and 51 percent had made a financial donation because of influence. This was across age groups and genders.

For cause marketers to achieve optimal reach, it is crucial to use the platforms aligned most effectively with not only audience, but also campaign objectives and content. Twitter has an extraordinary reach, yet ranks substantially lower in comparison to other platforms.

For people who follow digital influencers, Facebook is the most common social media platform where individuals follow influencers — coming in at a massive 70 percent of respondents. YouTube was the second-most

common, at 45 percent — surprising in some ways but also indicative of the power of video to transfix and engage, and the ease and efficiency with which YouTube videos can be shared and experienced on other sites and platforms. Gender disparities were fairly minimal, but were most noticeable on Facebook, YouTube and Pinterest.

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70 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS FOLLOW DIGITAL INFLUENCERS ON FACEBOOK, MAKING IT AN IMPORTANT TOOL FOR CAUSE MARKETERS.



Credit: Facebook

Age had a much stronger correlation to where influencers were followed. Facebook is less common with younger groups, peaking at 81 percent with those aged 55 to 64 years and 80 percent for those aged 65 and over, compared to just 38 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 24. There is a noticeable drop-off between those influencer followers aged 25 to 34, 62 percent of whom follow an influencer on Facebook, compared to just 38 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 24.

YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat are considerably more popular among younger groups, and platforms marketing savvy brands are using to reach this audience. For example, in Walmart's "Fight Hunger, Spark Change" Instagram campaign to support Feeding America, the company used seven influencers who created sponsored content to announce the foundation would donate 90 cents for

each "like" and use of #FightHunger to help provide meals to people in need. The goal was to raise \$1.5 million in 30 days, but it was so successful it raised that amount in just two days.

When planning a cause campaign, it is important to recognize which audiences are most appropriate for the efforts to engage, what type of content will most positively respond to, and how effectively those platforms can carry and amplify that type of content to that specific audience authentically. While course correction based on digital analytics is possible, it is always better to invest the time and insight into tactical alignment early—because the type of content created is deeply dependent on understanding accurately which digital platforms will be most effective for target demographics.



# IMPACT IS ACHIEVED BY TARGETING THE “RIGHT” INFLUENCERS

As outlined by Allison+Partners’ previous Influence Impact reports, influence is defined as the capacity to influence the character, development or behavior of someone or something. To truly understand the impact of that influence in the marketing and communications landscape, one must also consider:

- + **Reach:** The quantitative indicator of an individual’s personal network and includes the number of channels augmented by the number of followers/circulation/viewership.
- + **Authenticity:** The qualitative evaluation of bias, or lack thereof. It is analysis of the source, an individual’s personal credibility and the validity of their voice.
- + **Power:** The X factor that relates directly to impact and ultimately determines strength. This ability to take authenticity and reach and amplify them, comes from individuals with multiple channels of influence, a broad network of followers who are influencers themselves and an opportunity to access multiple platforms for storytelling.

By using this simple equation, cause marketers can better evaluate the potential impact influencers will have on inspiring and activating audiences. And they may not be the most obvious choices.

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$$\text{INFLUENCE} = [\text{Reach} + \text{Authenticity}] \times \text{Power}$$



Data reveal even though international media stars are often the most coveted for delivering messages for making an impact, marketers would be wise to not be blinded by the number of followers when considering cause.

Of those who follow digital influencers, 62 percent say an influencer who personally volunteers with the organization will "extremely/somewhat positively" impact their trust that influencer's recommendations regarding a cause or charitable organization. Sixty-one percent said the same about an influencer who shares stories of individuals helped or impacted by the cause in question.

Cause marketers would also be well-served to consider working with influencers closer to home. Nearly 46 percent of digital influencer followers also follow such local influencers as news casters, authors, chefs or business owners. Fifty-four percent of them are more likely to trust their local influencer more than a national one, and 65 percent are likely to try to find more information about a product or service recommended by that local influencer.

In addition to having impact online, the research shows influencers are also powerful drivers of word-of-mouth offline: 46 percent of those who follow digital influencers have talked about that influencer's content offline with family and friends, compared to just 40 percent who shared directly with someone on social and just 35 percent who shared it publicly on their channels. Of those who have engaged with a cause or charity due to an influencer for cause-specific engagements, 45 percent have shared content offline.

# THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CAUSE MARKETERS

For cause marketers today, it is important to do the research and consider things from all angles before rushing into strategic partnerships. Often, the most resonant and powerful cause marketing campaigns begin with some (deceptively) simple questions: Why? Why now? Why this cause? Why us? If a brand can take the time to do this, the end consumer will be better able to understand the connectivity of the brand's campaign.

Consumers not only look for an intrinsic and holistic connection between brands and the organizations they support, but also their commitment to doing social good as a fundamental part of the brands' DNA. That's why it is more important than ever that cause campaigns are built with "A.R.T." – authenticity, responsibility and transparency. By putting campaigns through this lens, brands will be better equipped to find their social impact voice and provide an authentic foundation to share and grow from.

Then—and arguably, only then—can they begin the strategic legwork to identify which audiences matter most, where they digitally congregate and how to most effectively reach them. Part of this is then ensuring the “right” influencers are being tapped—the ones who have supported or been touched by the cause. These are your storytellers who, through their authentic connection to the cause, can help others believe that it is worth championing.



# ABOUT THE INFLUENCE IMPACT REPORT

The Influence Impact report is an ongoing series that explores the dynamic forces that shape and drive consumers in an active ecosystem of influence. This report was compiled using three studies conducted in April 2017, which included an online survey of 1,024 people in the U.S. over the age of 18 using Qualtrics; an online survey of 1,000 people in the U.S. over the age of 18 that indicated they followed a digital influencer (identified as someone they follow online solely for the value of their content and not due to any offline relationship) using Survata; and an online survey of 1,065 people in the U.S. over the age of 18 to determine the incidence rate of those who follow digital influencers (identified as someone they follow online solely for the value of their content and not due to any offline relationship) using Survata.

## **ABOUT ALLISON+PARTNERS**

Allison+Partners, an MDC Partners company, is a global marketing and communications agency driven by a collaborative approach to innovation and creativity. The firm was named The Holmes Report's 2017 "Digital Agency of the Year," 2017 "Specialist Agency of the Year" and 2016 "Asia Pacific Corporate Agency of the Year," as well as PRWeek's 2015 "Midsize Agency of the Year." Allison+Partners has 27 offices worldwide and is organized around six practices: Consumer Marketing, Corporate, Global China, Health Care, Public Affairs and Technology. All Told, which combines research, content, creative, digital and measurement expertise into one offering, works across these practices to deliver integrated storytelling for clients. The agency also has a network and deep affiliations with firms worldwide through MDC Partners, a progressive marketing and communications network, championing the most innovative entrepreneurial talent.

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