

The impact of influencer marketing implementation on brand awareness and engagement in B2B businesses

SIKLOS Balázs

Enseignant-chercheur en Marketing,
ESC Clermont Business School

LUKMAN Jane

Étudiante,
ESC Clermont Business School

ALBERT-CROMARIAS Anne

Enseignant-chercheur HDR en Management stratégique,
ESC Clermont Business School / CleRMa

Abstract:

Influencer marketing is one of the most effective communication strategies due to its ability to spread corporate messages indirectly through influencers' personal content, making viewers consume advertisements unconsciously and unintentionally. It concerns not only end users, but also business professionals in a B2B context, who can rely on peer recommendations when making purchase decisions.

This paper aims at documenting B2B influencer marketing in both business practices and academic research, by focusing on the impact of influencer marketing implementation on brand awareness and engagement in B2B businesses. It is based on a case study regarding a French company in the field of autonomous vehicles and driverless technology. Our research emphasizes the importance of keeping an eye on social media trends and the benefits they provide namely business exposure and traffic enhancement. It also confirms that increasing sales figures in the short-term is not the main objective of B2B influencer marketing.

Keywords:

Influencer marketing; B2B; brand awareness; engagement; social media

Résumé :

Le marketing d'influence est l'une des stratégies de communication les plus efficaces, du fait de sa capacité à diffuser indirectement des messages via les communications personnelles des influenceurs, la publicité étant alors consommée de façon inconsciente et non intentionnelle. Or, ce marketing d'influence ne concerne pas seulement le consommateur final, mais aussi les professionnels dans des relations B2B, ceux-ci pouvant alors compter sur des recommandations par leurs pairs pour leurs décisions d'achat.

Cet article vise à documenter le marketing d'influence B2B, à la fois sur les plans pratique et académique. Il se centre sur l'impact opérationnel du marketing d'influence sur la connaissance de la marque et l'engagement dans des relations B2B. Le cas traité concerne une entreprise française qui opère dans le champ des véhicules autonomes. Notre recherche montre l'importance de prendre en considération les tendances des médias sociaux et le bénéfice que ces derniers apportent en matière de visibilité de l'activité et d'augmentation de trafic. Elle confirme également que l'augmentation des ventes à court-terme n'est pas l'objectif principal du marketing d'influence B2B.

Mots clés :

Marketing d'influence ; B2B ; notoriété de marque ; engagement ; médias sociaux

INTRODUCTION

On average, people spend nearly seven hours browsing the internet and 2 hours 25 minutes scrolling social media per day (Kemp, 2021). One of the biggest reasons behind the exploding trend of social media is that this platform allows us to connect and build relationships by sharing personal content, or what is called User-Generated Content (UGC) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Statistics also prove that most internet users utilize this technology to find information, surpassing the need to keep in touch with loved ones. The tendency of social media users to share their buying experience in online reviews can drive viewers' opinions and desires, accelerating the decision making process (Kurvinen & Seppä, 2016). However, not all social media users have the power to shift and inspire other people's thoughts. It needs someone charismatic who has a wide targeted audience with regular and frequent engagement to amplify the influence of their high quality content (Backaler, 2018; Enke & Borchers, 2019; Freberg et al. 2011). Levin (2020) sums up three main influence multipliers: expertise and credibility, relationship strength and audience size. People who possess all these criteria are often referred to as social media influencers.

In order to stand out in highly saturated social media contents overloaded with information, companies need to have a well-established social media presence (Kurvinen & Seppä, 2016). Recognizing the power of influencers in reaching their expansive target audience with positive engagement, marketers begin to build relationships and integrate influencer marketing in their communication strategies (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Keller & Berry, 2003). Influencer marketing has proven to be one of the most effective communication strategies due to its ability to spread corporate messages indirectly through influencers' personal content, making viewers consume advertisements unconsciously and unintentionally (More & Lingam, 2019). In addition, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) by influencers is more appealing, trustworthy, influential and welcomed compared to company's posts since they are considered as virtual friends that their audience can relate to (Isosuo, 2016; Thomson, 2006).

Not only end users but business professionals in a B2B context also rely on peer recommendations when making purchase decisions. Studies find that 89% of B2B buyers conduct online research to support their decision making process, with more than half of them trusting their peers' advocacy (Lapitan-Ashtiani, 2020). However, the power of influencers and their personal engagement with the target audience is commonly utilized by B2C businesses. Backaler (2018) further adds that influencer marketing is commonly misperceived to only be applicable to B2C businesses. The trend of B2B businesses and thought leaders' relationships is still emerging, and B2B professionals do not have a solid foundation in B2B influencer marketing strategy (Lapitan-Ashtiani, 2020). It should be noted that B2B businesses have several fundamental dissimilarities compared to B2C: more complex decision-making funnels, demand for highly valuable educational content and longer-term relationships with influencers (Baer, 2020; Erskine, 2017; Miller, 2012).

This paper therefore aims at documenting B2B influencer marketing in both business practices and academic research, by focusing on the impact of influencer marketing implementation on brand awareness and engagement in B2B businesses. In order to contribute to fill this gap, a case study is conducted regarding a French company in the field of autonomous vehicles and driverless technology.

Our paper is structured in three parts. We first present the main literature about social media and influencer marketing and then develop our research question. The second part is about our research methodology and the presentation of our case study. In the third part, we present our results and give some recommendations.

1. SOCIAL MEDIA AND INFLUENCER MARKETING: B2B IS CONCERNED

1.1. Social Media and « online sharing »

Even though the term “social media” is widely used, there is no definite explanation for its true meaning. According to Dewing (2012), social media is an extensive scope of mobile services which enable its users to actively take part in online exchanges, online communities, or share User-Generated Content (UGC) powered by the Internet. UGC is media content that is created by end-users, has public availability and comes in various forms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Weber (2007) emphasizes ‘online sharing’ as its unique feature and describes social media as a gathering place to share thoughts, comments and opinions for people with common interests. It is labelled as a digital technology which makes connection, interaction, production and content sharing possible (Lewis, 2010). Furthermore, Shirky (2008) explains social media as all tools beyond the traditional institutional and organizational frameworks upgrading our capability to share, cooperate and take action collectively. Content creation and dissemination are supported by this information infrastructure and tools utilization. The content itself is personal messages, news, ideas and cultural products in digital format and is conveyed and consumed by society, organizations and industries (Howard & Parks, 2012). In short, social media terminology highlights its unique feature of social networking and content sharing. Information and experiences are transmitted and discussed with efficiency (Parr, 2019). Photos, videos, news and opinions can be exchanged and posted with ease. In addition, social media also facilitates participation in online discussions. The convenience of interacting with a large audience by means of social media is suitable not only for individuals, but also companies, organizations, governments and parliamentarians. Facilitating tremendous reach and influence is the key role of these platforms (Dewing, 2012).

Social media, which is currently on the rise as an online communication tool, has an impact on society as a whole (Dân & Nam, 2018). Apart from keeping in touch with friends, relatives and communities, social media also allows companies, organizations, governments and parliamentarians to reach mass audiences (Dewing, 2012). Its efficiency of transmitting message captures marketers’ attention and encourages them to expand their marketing strategy. Social media is a new yet powerful channel for brands to reach both existing and potential new customers, including connecting and building relationships in a more direct, organic and personal way (Glucksman, 2017; Safko, 2012). By leveraging social media as part of communication strategy, firms are expanding their reachability and creating more positive interactions due to two-way communication (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Panagopoulos & Avlonitis, 2010). It is essential for marketers to keep track of social media trends that change rapidly, as its proper usage will bring enormous benefits such as generating business exposure, traffic enhancement, providing marketplace insight, greater responsiveness and satisfaction, and drastically improving brand reputation through better engagement and collaborations (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Isosuo, 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012). Active engagement on social media also helps companies to better understand their target audience, which eventually boosts sales performance (Lapitan-Ashtiani, 2020).

1.2. Social Media Influencers

Some social media users and content creators have a higher social presence than others, such as thousands of followers and become trendsetters due to their high influence. These people are called “social media influencers”. They are dynamic third-party endorsers who produce and distribute high quality content and actively interact with their audience on a personal level, building significant relationships and successfully influencing organizational stakeholders (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Freberg et al. 2011). They have a consistent self-presentation in cyberspace that reflects one’s personal identity (Schau & Gilly, 2003), which is done through self-disclosure, either consciously or unconsciously (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As the name suggests, social media influencers earn their fame through social media presence and not from film, music or TV shows like traditional celebrities. One of the greatest privileges of social media influencers is their unique identity of both being famous and ordinary people (Jin et al., 2019).

Social media influencers are respected as “trusted tastemakers” in one or several niches and establish a large followers network (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). They deliver the latest and most current updates on a specific topic as well as provide product recommendations, descriptions, and evaluations. As a consequence, consumer attitudes, behaviours and perceptions will be affected and procurement will be encouraged (Liu et al., 2015; Munukka, Uusitalo, & Toivonen, 2016). Furthermore, they are considered as “micro-celebrities” as they use their high recognizability for social influence and monetization (Jin et al., 2019). They have the power to shape viewers’ attitudes, public opinions and drive their actions through social media posts (Freberg et al., 2011). The higher their social presence and acknowledgement, the greater their social influence towards each other’s behaviour (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). According to Schiffman, Kanuk, and Hansen (2012), social media influencers can also be defined as “reference group”, as they provide references for people in shaping values and attitudes, as well as support consumers in their purchasing decisions. When seeking for product information, consumers often look up to social media influencers as they are believed to be trustworthy information providers (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). Social media influencers act as sellers, buyers and commodities simultaneously: they consume the products/services, promote them and sell themselves as a brand for public consumption. In short, influencers are well-connected, influential and in the know people whose advice, direction, knowledge and opinions are looked for (Hall, 2017).

Recently, there has been an increasing trend of utilizing micro-influencers in marketing strategies. Having fewer followers, micro-influencers comprise a more homogenous audience with similar interests and have deeper engagement with them, resulting in a more personalized and well-crafted message (Taylor, 2020). Studies have also found that they are the digital opinion-leaders who influence their audience the most since they have bigger trust and credibility. Moreover, they come at a more affordable price compared to macro-influencers, which appeals to companies with small marketing budgets to work and collaborate with them (Geiser, 2017).

Of course, having millions of followers is an essential requirement for any well-established thought leader. However, their success does not rely solely on the number of followers and requires more than that, namely a deeper connection and understanding with their audience on a personal level (Glucksman, 2017). According to Levin (2020), there are three main levers that act as influence multipliers, which are expertise and credibility, relationship strength and audience size.

To sum up, brand awareness and purchase intention are leveraged by thought leaders’ credibility which is built from sharing influencer-generated content with highly informative value, their trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise, and perceived similarity with the target audience (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

1.3. Influencer Marketing

Having a well-established social media presence is essential for companies to maintain relationships with their customers. However, it is not enough to just be present on social media platforms. They ought to deliver value-added contents to capture attention and stand out in the flood of irrelevant information (Kurvinen & Seppä, 2016). Recognizing the power of influencers to reach, engage and convince audience’s needs and desires through the credible image they possess, companies start to establish relationships with them and implement influencer marketing strategy in their business practices (De Veirman et al., 2017; Keller & Berry, 2003).

Influencer marketing encompasses it all: identifying, engaging and assisting thought leaders who are conversation creators to target audiences. This strategy has succeeded in breaking down the walls separating brands and customers, transforming the way they communicate (Glucksman, 2017). In a world of information overload and product diversity, collaborating with influencers is becoming increasingly important as they provide indecisive customers with trusted and well-considered recommendations. Moreover, consumers are more willing to receive product messages from social media influencers rather than companies’ posts (De Veirman et al., 2017). By teaming up with social media influencers, companies are able to indirectly spread corporate messages in the most authentic and effective way without disturbing and annoying the audience (Keller & Berry, 2003). It can also be aimed at a highly targeted and niche group, unlike traditional advertising which only covers a wide audience (Kurvinen & Seppä, 2016).

Partnering with influencers brings many benefits to the brand. Through them, brands can promote contents with high relevancy and relatability (Glucksman, 2017). They also build stronger relationships, more personal engagement, gain more awareness and recognition plus enhance brand image (Labrecque et al., 2013). While from the influencers side, their objectives are to build stronger relationships with key audiences through brand reputation development, boost customer awareness against their online activities and gather customer comments and feedback. Collecting viewers' input plays a vital role for generating personal conversations and connections, establishing more interpersonal relationships and maintaining interactivity (Glucksman, 2017). To sum up, the success of influencer marketing is measured by the thought leaders' ability to stand out in today's noise and content saturated digital environment in the most authentic and natural way (Lapitan-Ashtiani, 2020).

1.4. What about B2B Influencer Marketing?

According to Lapitan-Ashtiani (2020), B2B audiences are actively present online with 89% of B2B buyers spanning across all industries surf the Internet to gather information for research before making a purchase decision. Previous studies authenticate that the effective use of influencers will positively impact B2B business sales figures, significantly affecting their decision making (Backaler, 2018). Influencer marketing strategy can also enhance audience reach, brand credibility and message resonance (Hall, 2017). Although influencer marketing is commonly used in B2C businesses, there is no valid reason to overlook this new but effective communication strategy for B2B business practices.

B2B influencer marketing is currently rising due to three factors (Hall, 2017): (1) Maturation and more sophisticated social platforms; (2) B2B customers getting more active on social media in more versatile ways, mainly on LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube; (3) Influencers' ability to stand out above an overwhelming rate of content. Whereas Zeckman (2019) categorizes five different types of B2B influencers delivering different values to audiences and brands, there is one criterion that must be possessed: expertise. B2B influencers must have in-depth industry knowledge and expertise as they target corporate buyers and business professionals. Backaler (2018) further adds that credibility and transparency play a vital role in B2B influencer marketing campaigns. Unlike B2C influencer campaigns that accentuate emotional phrases and low price campaigns to drive instant purchases, B2B target audiences expect educational content with reliable problem-solving information for the sake of long-term, sustainable customer relationships (Baer, 2020; Erskine, 2017; Miller, 2012). Additionally, B2B marketing does not target end-users the way B2C does. Their main target is decision makers who have a big responsibility for the company's success. These people are not easily induced as their decisions will affect the company's resources and their own credibility (Leake, Vaccarello, & Ginty, 2012).

Previous studies have proven that collaborating with influencers brings many benefits to the brand. Whilst this strategy is commonly applied in B2C businesses, there is no denying that effective influencer marketing also positively impacts business performance in a B2B context. Researches find that B2B thought leaders' opinions and recommendations have succeeded in influencing decision makers to make purchases, hence sales figures will ultimately increase (Backaler, 2018). However, some studies argue that increasing sales figures is not the main goal of B2B influencer marketing (Backaler, 2018). Instead, the strategy implementation will primarily focus on developing B2B brand image, awareness and engagement (Hall, 2017; Lapitan-Ashtiani, 2020).

In this research, regarding that sales conversion is not the main focus for measuring B2B influencer marketing success since this marketing strategy takes a longer time than B2C businesses to make purchase decisions (Baer, 2020; Lapitan-Ashtiani, 2020), we explore the relationship between influencer marketing and B2B brand awareness and engagement.

2. EMPIRICAL STUDY: THE CASE OF EASYMILE

Our study is based on the case of EasyMile, a French company in the field of autonomous vehicles. The purpose of our study is to analyse brand awareness and engagement. To do so, we use both quantitative data, by extracting data from social media, and qualitative data, made of 20 interviews.

2.1. EasyMile, the autonomous vehicle that becomes real

EasyMile is a French company, created in 2014 in Toulouse, and now located in France, Germany, Singapore, United States and Japan. It employs 250 people of 22 nationalities.

Its mission (according to its own website) is to bring “driverless vehicle solutions for people and goods to life with leading technology, providing a real service”. It developed a people mover solution, called EZ10, which is the most deployed autonomous shuttle in the world. For material handling, TractEasy is a tow-truck solution optimizing supply chains with cross/indoor-outdoor, 24/7 material handling at factories and industrial sites.

Today, more than 100 EZ10 autonomous shuttles are in use across the world, with 9 new shuttles deployed in the US (Colorado) since August 2021. In the spring of 2021, the company raised €55 million to finance its development, finalise its technology and accelerate its international deployment to sell its first commercial models in 2022.

Its clients are transport operators, city authorities, airports, manufacturers, universities, hospitals, factories or logistics centers. Its values are innovation, excellence, teamwork and creativity.

2.2. Data collection

Our data collection is made of both primary and secondary data. One of the authors of this research was employed during six months at EasyMile, with access to many primary data. We also document our study with desk research.

Regarding quantitative data, we focus on LinkedIn as the main social media platform for influencer marketing execution since B2B business professionals and decision makers tend to network and share business content there, accounted for 85% (Demand Gen Report, 2016). Furthermore, EasyMile and influencers’ greatest social media engagement are generally on LinkedIn, far outperforming Twitter and Facebook. Data from LinkedIn are extracted from each influencer’s post engagement (total reactions, comments and views) as well as EasyMile’s LinkedIn Page analytics report. Whereas to assess the website performance, data are retrieved from EasyMile’s Google Analytics report. We also inspect EasyMile’s website backend to monitor conversions such as brochure downloads and sales enquiries.

Qualitative data were collected through 20 interviews of “EasyMilers”, conducted in February 2021 during a Sales Kick Off Meeting. This survey was a way to identify top influencer characteristics according to EasyMile’s employees and to cross them with those identified by the literature.

Through keywords, hashtags and referrals from renowned influencers and colleagues, the author manages to build an influencer list. In total, the author evaluates 77 influencers from various countries and continents who meet all the requirements and are perceived as ideal. After several discussions and meetings with the team, only five influencers were selected, with whom relationships and collaborations will be nourished. The details of each locked-in influencer are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. The 5 studied EasyMile’s influencers

N°	Format	Product	Followers
1	Video podcast + LinkedIn Live	TractEasy	50,000
2	YouTube blog	TractEasy	130,000
3	Audio podcast	TractEasy	16,000
4	LinkedIn post (video)	TractEasy EZ10	2,600,000
5	Blog post	EZ10	20,000

2.3. Data treatment

Then, we execute the five-stages influencer marketing process (Hall, 2017).

1. Prepare and plan. At this stage, we clarify the goal of influencer marketing implementation with the communications team. The primary objective is to increase brand awareness, while lead generation and sales development are secondary. Moreover, this newly applied strategy accentuates TractEasy more than EZ10. We also study TractEasy customer personas, which are business professionals in supply chain, logistics, innovation and automation. The targeted industries cover industrial sites and logistics centers in any field: automotive, pharmaceuticals, food and beverage, etc. Furthermore, the targeted countries are also important to be kept in mind: the US and Germany, then Switzerland, Belgium, France, Singapore and South Korea. We are then able to list several KPIs and metrics as well, which are going to be tracked and measured for performance evaluation.
2. Identify influencers. After getting a thorough understanding of the key aspects in the first stage, the authors start looking for the targeted influencers. We search manually through keywords and hashtags such as material handling, supply chain, logistics, warehouse and autonomous vehicles. LinkedIn acts as the main social media platform as the majority of business professionals are actively using it. This fact is also supported by Twitter performance, which has a lower engagement rate for both EasyMile and the targeted influencers. To expand the influencer list, the authors get referrals from colleagues and key influencers.
3. Select influencers. Several criteria are applied to pick out the ideal influencer such as a broad audience of more than 1,000 LinkedIn followers, highly professional with over 10 years of work experience, good engagement rate with at least 1% and not talking about sensitive issues like politics and religion. Content analysis is performed manually; examining the influencers' social media presence and activities to ensure conformity between the influencers' and EasyMile's brand identity. Having a well-defined marketing budget is also vital to build a priority list and estimate the maximum expense per influencer. At this stage, a meeting consisting of communications and marketing teams spread across France, Germany and the US was held on February 2021.
4. Engage and activate. Of the 77 influencers discussed on the influencer list, we begin to contact 15 influencers that are chosen as the most ideal ones. We use LinkedIn InMail Messages (for premium users) and Connection Requests (for regular users) to approach thought leaders. After getting their email address, we send an introductory document explaining TractEasy or EZ10 and the exclusive benefits they could obtain. To ensure a mutually beneficial collaboration, organizing a short call is necessary to discuss and negotiate each other's preferences. While waiting for their response and follow-ups, we prepare several documents such as content catalogue and influencer marketing contract.
5. Measure results. After reaching an agreement with the influencer and launching the campaign, the authors monitor its effectiveness against several KPIs on website performance and social media engagement. The authors use LinkedIn Page Analytics and Google Analytics to track the impact of influencers advocacy. It is important to note that increasing sales figures is not the main goal of EasyMile's influencer marketing strategy as EasyMile products take more than a year to close the deal.

To measure the efficacy of influencer marketing strategy against brand awareness and engagement, we track several metrics extracted from LinkedIn Page Analytics and Google Analytics. They are classified into four categories (cf. Table 2): Social Media Engagement; LinkedIn Audience; Landing Page Traffic; Lead Generation.

In this research, a two-week period is applied as LinkedIn posts have a longer lifespan and are still viewable on the homepage weeks after the day of posting. Therefore, two weeks before and two weeks after content distribution are evaluated.

In addition, we calculate two ratios: engagement rate (i.e. "total reactions and comments / total followers") and video engagement rate (i.e. "total reactions and comments / total views").

Table 2. Metrics definition

Metrics	Definition
Social Media Engagement	
Likes/reactions	Total reactions obtained from each post (like, celebrate, support, love, insightful, curious)
Comments	Interactions in each post through the comment section
Video views	How many times the video is played (at least 3 seconds)
LinkedIn Audience	
Followers growth	The amount of LinkedIn users that recently followed EasyMile company page (two weeks after influencer's post)
Page views	How many times EasyMile LinkedIn Page is visited after seeing influencer's EasyMile-related post
Unique visitors	The total number of individual members who have come to EasyMile company page
Landing Page Traffic Behaviour	
Sessions	The number of times the traffic is actively engaged with the webpage. A session ends by default after 30 minutes of inactivity
Page views	Number of pages viewed. Repeated views of one page are counted
Lead Generation	
Brochure downloads	How many times TractEasy brochure is downloaded by potential clients
Sales enquiries	Submitted website contact form that indicates interest in deploying TractEasy on their industrial sites

3. RESULTS

An overview of our results is presented in Table 3. Details are given for each metric in the following paragraphs. In Table 3, "+" is for numerical growth; "-" indicates degradation and "=" means no change.

Table 3. Synthetic results

		Main events	N°1	N°3	N°4a	N°4b	N°4c	N°4d	N°5
Engagement rate			+	+	+	+	+	+	-
LinkedIn Performance	Followers Growth		+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Page Views		+	+	+	+	-	+	+
	Unique Visitors		+	+	+	+	-	+	+
Website Performance from Google Analytics	Homepage Sessions		+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Homepage Views		+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	TractEasy Sessions		+	+	+	-	+		
	TractEasy Page Views		+	+	+	-	+		
	EZ10 Sessions							+	+
	EZ10 Page Views							+	-
Lead Generation	Brochure Downloads		+	+	+	=	=		
	Sales Enquiries		+	+	=	=	=	+	+

3.1. Influencers' Posts Engagement Rate

Seven EasyMile-related content that are posted by four influencers generate different outcomes from various formats. N°4, who delivers four EasyMile content in video format via his personal LinkedIn has a consistent engagement rate growth over time. Even though the first post is the most viewed video with the highest number of reactions, the engagement rate is the lowest compared to the other three. This finding corresponds to the engagement rate formula, which divides total reactions by total views. The more frequently the video is played, the lower the engagement rate will be. Ultimately, the success of an influencer marketing campaign depends on the company's goal. If the main objective is to reach as many audiences as possible, then the number of total views is the most important metrics to track. On the other hand, if the company intends to have deeper interaction and connection with their audience, then engagement rate is surely the fundamental quantification.

N°1, N°3 and N°5 advocate EasyMile through a video podcast, audio podcast, and a blog, respectively. N°3's podcast is one of the most well-known logistics podcasts; it is in German language and highly focused on the German-speaking market. Compared to other global influencers, his post certainly has a lower engagement rate. Yet, Germany is one of EasyMile's main target markets. Hence, building such a relationship is not in vain.

In contrast with N°3, N°1 reaches a wider audience and has an exceptional online presence due to her positivity. She also treats her followers like her friends and interacts frequently with them by liking or commenting on their posts. The casual and relaxed atmosphere eases the interviewee's nerves and keeps the viewers' attention until the end. N°1's outstanding performance is observable through her engagement rate, which reaches 5.71%.

N°5's profile as a real-estate futurist fits perfectly to advocate EZ10 private sites. However, her blog post does not perform really well. This inferior engagement rate can be affected by many factors, one of which might be that N°5's online presence is not as well-established as her offline presence as a Top 10 Futurist Keynote Speaker. Nevertheless, collaborating with an expert like N°5 can enhance EasyMile's credibility and image as a thought leader.

3.2. LinkedIn Audience

Followers Growth

Collaborating with the right influencers is proven to increase the number of LinkedIn users who follow EasyMile page, showing their awareness and interest in keeping up with company updates.

Despite the fluctuation, seven influencers' posts positively widen EasyMile's audience in d+0 or d+1. The highest spike occurs on 12 July 2021, when N°4's EZ10 video and N°1's TractEasy video podcast were published. Compared to the previous day, EasyMile grows its followers by 300%. The second highest performance hits on 5 July 2021. On this day, N°3 posted his audio podcast. An increment of 250% is achieved and still increasing by 43% on the next day. The following upsurges are delivered through N°4's first post on 2 June 2021, N°5's blog post on 15 July 2021, N°4's second post on 22 June 2021 and N°4's third post on 1 July 2021 with 167%, 100%, 50% and 25% growth successively.

Total Page Views

Influencers also raise the curiosity of their audience to know more about the products or services they are posting about. Therefore, more LinkedIn users will view the EasyMile page referring to the distributed influencer posts. The escalation appears more rapid than the followers' growth, which is observed on the exact same day from the posting date (d+0). The first- and second-best are attained on 12 July 2021 and 5 July 2021, when N°1, N°3 and N°4 published EasyMile video and podcasts. A rise of 207% and 151% are observed consecutively, with an extra 35% increase on the next day still appearing for N°3's German audio podcast. The subsequent growth is carried out by N°3's second post on 22 June 2021, N°5's blog post on 15 July 2021 and N°3's first post on 2 June 2021 with 43%, 24% and 15% respectively.

Total Unique Visitors

Just like the surge of page views, the number of LinkedIn users visiting EasyMile page has also increased since the influencer marketing campaign was launched. Having similar ups and downs to the page views graph, particularly a hike on d+0, N°4's EZ10 video, N°1's TractEasy video podcast and N°3's TractEasy audio podcast are still the main highlight of success, with 224% and 183% rise on 12 July 2021 and 5 July 2021 plus an additional 53% on the following day for the German audio podcast. N°4's second post, N°4's first post and N°5's blog post hover around 34%, 15% and 2% on 22 June 2021, 2 June 2021 and 15 July 2021.

3.3. Landing Page Traffic

Homepage

The homepage is the main touch point of the website, no matter what product the influencer advocates. Be it TractEasy or EZ10, the "EasyMile" brand will resonate deeper in the minds of audiences since it is clearly typed and tagged in the caption or podcast title. Hence, the effectiveness of all seven influencer posts against homepage sessions and page views will be analysed.

Ever since EasyMile established relationships with influencers, homepage sessions have shown an increasing trend, especially on the same day (d+0) or following day (d+1) from the date of posting. Consistent with LinkedIn performance in the previous section, N°4's fourth post along with N°1's video podcast delivered the highest yield of 330% on 12 July 2021, followed by N°3's German audio podcast at 294% which is still slightly increasing two days after 5 July 2021. A growth of 55%, 27%, 24% and 14% are observed on 2 June 2021, 22 June 2021, 15 July 2021 and 1 July 2021 resulting from N°4's first, second and third posts, and N°5 blog post.

The frequency by which EasyMile's homepage is viewed has also multiplied due to influencer marketing campaigns. Having similar flow as the previous section, positive outcomes to homepage page views is also mainly reaped at d+0 or d+1. Still topped by N°4's video, N°1's video podcast and N°3's audio podcast, the number of page views is magnified by 334% and 274% on 12 July 2021 and 5 July 2021. The following sequence is also unchanged.

TractEasy

The main product of EasyMile's influencer marketing campaign is TractEasy tow tractor. Thus, of the seven posts shared by influencers, five of them focused on TractEasy.

The surge of TractEasy traffic happened quickly, on the day of posting (d+0). N°4's first post of TractEasy short video on 2 June 2021 yields an outstanding and unbeatable performance with 1,067% escalation on d+0. The spike can still be observed for a period of nine days. According to EasyMile's Marketing Communications Lead, the usual number of TractEasy page views in a month is attained in just one week after this collaboration.

Subsequent surges are delivered through podcasts: N°3's German audio podcast on 5 July 2021 and N°1's video podcast a week after, 12 July 2021. TractEasy sessions mounted by 1200% and 300% respectively, with the trend still positively observed three days later. In addition, an increase of 175% was given by N°4's third post, which was published on 1 July 2021.

TractEasy page views trend is very much alike to its sessions, with a positive upsurge visible on d+0 and N°4's short video on 2 June 2021 taking the lead. Having a step-up of 231% on the first day, N°4's first post still has superior results for nine days. Being featured in podcasts also has a huge impact on TractEasy's performance in a positive way. N°1's video podcast on 12 July 2021 brings a 2,200% increase, while N°3's audio podcast on 5 July 2021 reaps a 456% increase. These constructive trends still endure up to five days after the posting day.

EZ10

The EZ10 passenger shuttle is already the star of EasyMile, with over 400 deployments in more than 30 countries all around the world. Accordingly, influencer marketing for EZ10 is overshadowed by TractEasy, with two out of seven influencer posts, or even nine (two TractEasy content has gone live in September and October 2021).

Both influencer posts about EZ10 successfully boosted EZ10 sessions rapidly up to the following day after the posting day (d+0 and d+1). On 12 July 2021, N°4's EZ10 video raised the sessions by 160% on d+0, which further continued by 85% on d+1. Three days later, 15 July 2021, the publication of N°5's blog post generated 143% growth on d+1.

EZ10 page views has also increased by force of influencer marketing campaign. A steep rise is visible on 12 July 2021 by 232% when N°4 published the EZ10 video on his LinkedIn. It continues to increase the day after (d+1) by 56%. Meanwhile, on 15 July 2021, N°5's blog post encountered a slight decline of 4%.

3.4. Lead Generation

The effectiveness of an influencer marketing campaign can also be examined from how many quality leads it acquires. According to EasyMile Sales Team, figure that is normally earned in a month is successfully achieved in a week. Statistically, inbound leads that have a direct impact on sales performance escalate by 300%.

Brochure Downloads

Downloaded TractEasy brochure serves as an indicator of how many people are interested and want to know more about TractEasy specifications and its capabilities. From all five TractEasy content, N°4's short video on 2 June 2021 provides the highest quantity, with two brochures downloaded on d+0 and one brochure on d+1. The second-best performance is achieved by N°1's video podcast on 12 July 2021. Her content generates two brochure downloads: one on d+0 and one on d+1. N°3's audio podcast, which premiered on 5 July 2021, also has a satisfactory result. One TractEasy brochure is downloaded on d+0.

Sales Enquiries

Sales enquiries are a more important and serious process. Not only out of curiosity, clients who ask about sales are implicitly fascinated by the deployment of the autonomous vehicle. Since influencer marketing became one of EasyMile's communication strategies, six sales enquiries, whether it is TractEasy or EZ10, are received. N°1's video podcast on 12 July 2021 delivers one TractEasy sales enquiry on d+1. As for the EZ10 sales enquiries, N°4's video on 12 July 2021 contributes to one sales enquiry on d+0 and three sales enquiries on d+2. N°5's blog post on 15 July 2021 also yields one EZ10 sales enquiry on the following day (d+1).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Summary of the findings and recommendations

The inclusion of influencer marketing as one of the communication strategies at EasyMile proves that B2B businesses and social media influencers truly belong to each other. Statistically speaking, a good LinkedIn post generates a 2% engagement rate. In fact, most EasyMile influencer campaigns attain engagement rates far higher than the average value, of up to 6.49%. This achievement demonstrates that mutually beneficial relationships are established between EasyMile and influencers: they provide valuable content to their audience that successfully magnetizes attention and strengthens the relationship, and EasyMile's brand awareness as well as engagement increase. Several specified metrics in this research such as LinkedIn followers growth, LinkedIn page views, LinkedIn unique visitors, landing page sessions, landing page page views and brochure downloads mostly encounter significant growth on the posting date or on the following day (d+0 or d+1). After conducting a deeper analysis, we conclude that the most powerful formats for B2B influencer marketing campaigns are short videos that do not encompass blatant corporate self-promotion, and podcasts which are currently a big trend among B2B professionals. However, EasyMile sales enquiries do not show a rapid advancement like in brand awareness and engagement metrics. This performance confirms that B2B decision makers take longer to take decisions due to the higher risk involved.

These research findings suggest that B2B businesses should start implementing influencer marketing in their business practices as it will effectively increase brand awareness and engagement. However, they should not

focus on improving sales conversion as more time is required. Companies also need to keep an eye on current social media trends to maximize the output. It is also crucial to remember that the audience detests corporate gibberish. Hence, distributing content with indirect advertising is highly advised.

Furthermore, conducting an inspection on the similarities between the influencer's audience and the company's persona should not be forgotten about. Targeting the right audience is much more important than targeting a broad audience; quality over quantity must be kept in mind. In addition, ensuring that influencers utilize the same platform as the company uses to connect with the audience must not be missed.

4.2. Main contributions

Collaborating with influencers successfully increased EasyMile's performance. As shown in Table 3, positive impacts which are symbolized by "+" dominate the KPIs. The best-performed campaigns are N°4's fourth post along with N°1's video podcast, N°3's audio podcast and N°4's first post. In a nutshell, the most preferable format for influencer marketing campaigns are podcasts and short videos. Podcasts are currently a big hit in the market, especially for B2B businesses who target professionals. In line with previous research (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Isosuo, 2016; Kim and Ko, 2012), our research emphasizes the importance of keeping an eye on social media trends and the benefits they provide namely business exposure and traffic enhancement. Furthermore, targeted audiences also love to watch videos, specifically short ones that are not too sales-y. Indirect advertising is proven to work more effectively than presenting the viewers with plenty of corporate information. These findings are justified by N°4's first video which far outperforms his second and third videos.

Another interesting discovery in this research is that low engagement rate does not always mean failure. N°3's audio podcast which obtains engagement rate below average surprisingly delivers superb results. In accordance with Taylor (2020), micro-influencers with homogenous audience like N°3 are more effective and generate impressive outcomes. Targeting the right audience and capturing their attention are more important than having interaction with a high engagement rate. Thus, it is highly crucial for a company in a niche industry like EasyMile to ensure that influencers' audience have a similar profile to the company's target market.

Cross-checking whether the influencer has a well-established online presence is also critical. In EasyMile's influencer marketing case, N°5, who has several major achievements such as Top 10 Futurist Keynote Speaker, Top 25 Most Influential CRE Innovators and Top 100 Real Estate Executive, seems to be honored more in real life than in cyberspace. Her blog post on EZ10 only generates 8 likes out of 20,000 LinkedIn followers on her profile. Having a very low engagement rate, her contribution to the KPIs is also insignificant. Therefore, ensuring that the company and the influencer use the same platform to communicate with their audience is fundamental. Being famous offline does not always guarantee being famous online; and being famous on platform A does not guarantee a remarkable outcome on platform B.

Based on Table 3, it is evident that collaborating with influencers will positively contribute to B2B business performance, especially on brand awareness and engagement. Our study confirms that B2B professionals take a longer time to make purchase decisions because of the huge responsibility they have to endure. Consequently, increasing sales figures is not the main objective of B2B influencer marketing. These findings are in line with previous studies which prove that developing brand awareness and engagement rather than sales conversion is the primary goal of B2B influencer marketing (Backaler, 2018; Baer, 2020; Hall, 2017; Lapitan-Ashtiani, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Influencer marketing is currently on the rise and is considered one of the most effective communication strategies, far outperforming traditional advertising. However, this strategy is commonly misinterpreted as only suitable for B2C businesses. The implementation of B2B influencer marketing in both academic and professional contexts is still limited and rare. Recognizing this gap, this study aims to determine the effectiveness of B2B influencer marketing on brand awareness and engagement. The authors focus on a highly niche industry like EasyMile, an autonomous vehicle solutions provider. A total of 77 influencers are examined in the process. After several discussions and considerations, the five most ideal influencers to collaborate with EasyMile are selected. We are therefore able to compare the effectiveness of the various distributed formats: LinkedIn video, podcast and blog post. Data are retrieved from LinkedIn Page Analytics for EasyMile's primary social media account and Google Analytics for its website. A four-week time frame is applied for data analysis, which is the preceding and following two weeks of influencer's posting date. Several KPIs are monitored such as social media engagement rate, LinkedIn audience growth, landing page traffic behaviour and lead generation.

Since this study only encompasses few influencers for data collection, future research could be improved by using a larger sample size. Not only LinkedIn videos, podcasts and blog posts, but numerous other publication formats can also be included and analysed. Furthermore, including different types of B2B industries in further studies is also valuable to make general implications. The period examined can be extended for a minimum of one year, since the B2B decision-making funnel requires a longer time to complete. Last but not least, future research should ascertain whether superior performance actually occurs as an impact of influencer marketing and is not the result of other corporate news published in the same time period that triggers higher engagement.

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