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Janice Hostager: 0:28

I'm Janice Hostager. After three decades in the marketing business and many years of being an entrepreneur, I've learned a thing or two about marketing. Join me as we talk about marketing, small business, and life in between. Welcome to My Weekly Marketing. If you ever bought anything from an influencer or maybe been persuaded by an influencer, I have. I wasn't persuaded by a celebrity, but if someone I respect in the business world recommends something, I am listening. Turns out I'm not alone. 74% of consumers have made purchases based on an influencer's recommendation. But when you're running a small service-based business, it can feel a little out of your leagues, right? If that's your friend, pull up a chair. Today we're diving into the wild and wonderful, sometimes intimidating world of influencer marketing. And before you mentally check out thinking this is for big brands with massive budgets, let me stop you right there. Because my guest today, Sarah Stahl, is brilliant at breaking down how everyday small businesses, yes, even tiny but mighty solo shops like yours can use influencer marketing authentically and without feeling like you're bribing the cool kids to sit at your lunch table. So if you've ever wondered how influencer marketing actually works, you're in the right place. Let's jump in. Hey Sarah, welcome to My Weekly Marketing.

Sarah Stahl: 1:36

Hey, happy to be here with you.

Janice Hostager: 1:39

So you're in the hospitality industry, but you work with marketing, right? So tell me your story a little bit. How have you used influencer? Because that's what we're talking about today.

Sarah Stahl: 1:49

Yeah, just a little bit of a backup. I've been in marketing for 15 years and actually got my start in e-commerce and smaller brands. And then I transitioned into hospitality about seven years ago when I became a tourism director. And then from there, I actually fell in love with hospitality, but I love the business side of things. And as a tourism director, you tend to focus more on the government side of tourism. So I got an opportunity to kind of bring everything together with a startup treehouse resort close by to where I live. And was able to, I was the fourth employee hired on their team as the head of marketing. And we just use really solid marketing prowess to be able to build this brand from nothing. And one of the key pillars we used to do that was influencer marketing.

Janice Hostager: 2:43

Gotcha. Gotcha. So a lot of listeners might kind of feel that influencer marketing is kind of for the big brands with the bigger budgets. Can you start by explaining like what

influencer marketing looks like for small businesses, especially service-based businesses? Well, any small business sounds like.

Sarah Stahl: 3:00

Yeah, absolutely. So I like to take it back a step because there's kind of an understanding of what influencer marketing is when you think about it. And you tend to think of like Kim Kardashian or like you're hiring some big name to get a lot of eyeballs on your product as quickly as possible for the sake of virality. That's kind of like the core understanding of what influencer marketing is. But really, it's so much more than that. I actually think that the bigger voices actually are losing their capabilities to convert folks, whether they're converting service or whether they're converting on a product, because influencer marketing, from what I've seen and working with hundreds of creators, it's actually just somebody's ability to use their influence in their sphere based off of the content that they already create to alert their audience of something different or something alternative or something that they should consider. So there are millions of what I call, and you know, people call this to micro influencers. So they're folks with less than 10,000 followers, and they're usually have high regional viewership or folks that love watching them, love hearing what they have to say, love hearing their take. And so whenever they bring something new to the table or they try something new, it influences others to try it too. And from a sales perspective, I'll just finish this point up. It takes somewhere, and this is across the board, regardless of what industry you're in, it takes somewhere between 20 and 30 touch points to convert a cold lead into selling a service or a product. But when you put that same service or product in front of an audience that an influencer is endorsing, it takes less than seven. So there's just a trust barrier in the marketplace for lots of reasons that people don't trust what brands are saying. They assume that they're putting their best foot forward, they're not going to hear anything negative come out of the brand. Where the creator, if you will, we'll use creator for the rest of this conversation instead of influencer. The creator actually has a different take and one that they've already built a community of people who know, like, and trust them. So it's a lot easier to hear what they have to say and to break through that noise.

Janice Hostager: 5:33

Hmm. That's a really good point. I mean, I was thinking about this, like as I was writing the intro for this, I was thinking about like, have I bought from an influencer? And yeah, yeah. Um without even realizing it. Even somebody that in like the business world that recommends a book, like, and like, okay, I'm gonna get that, you know? Yeah. And even a friend, well, this is a whole different level, but even when friends recommend something, it's that same level of no like and trust, right? You that's what influencers have, that authority.

Sarah Stahl: 6:06

And creators build that friendship with their niche audience, even if it's a small one, even if it's a couple thousand people. I think the disservice that a lot of businesses make, especially when they think of influencers, is they're like, I need to go for somebody big, but they're expensive, right? To like have Kim Kardashian do a product drop on, you know, that's like millions of dollars. And, you know, that's to me, that's not a short-term, that's not a long-term solution for business growth and development. A long-term solution is finding the right people who have the ear, the eyes and ears of your audience, and then developing relationships with them over time.

Janice Hostager: 6:47

Yeah, yeah, love it. So if you have a small business, where do you find influencers? Do you need to work with an agency, for example, or do you can you reach out to somebody or?

Sarah Stahl: 6:58

No, absolutely not. You need to use your social media search abilities, really. You all you only have to start small. Um, so every audience or every industry has different niches within them. So I know I'm in the hospitality industry, but I also am a service provider myself. I'm a consultant for property management companies, and I also bring in business from a service perspective myself. And so one of the things that I do is, for example, I have an audit that I sell to look at property management properties' ability to bring in bookings. And so when I first launched the audit, I actually launched it free. So the first 10 people who signed up on the landing page on my website actually got a free free audit that I they had to actually consent to saying, yes, I want to participate in this. Yes, I understand that you're gonna be looking at all sides of my business, both positive and negative, and you're gonna be using it in a video to share online, right? So they had to consent to that. But I gave 10 people the audit for free. So then from there, I actually got reviews from them. I got feedback from them on how to improve the process. And so I brought in these 10 people as part of my process to develop the service product to be able to spread the word a little more efficiently. So I found those people a couple of different ways. One, I use ChatGPT to basically if you've if you've ever used sales navigator for LinkedIn to try to find people or source people. Um, I don't spend the money for sales navigators, so I actually used ChatGPT in a format to find people on LinkedIn on a very specific niche level. So I developed brand alternatives to who I am and what I provide. And then from there I was able to find people on LinkedIn. So then I would follow them and I would connect with them and I got to know them. And all of my content is around solving their specific problem because I know my clients so well, I know what the problem is. And I actually don't sell on LinkedIn, I don't sell send DMs, I just find these people, and then I find people like them, and then I look at who's creating content. So there's other people creating content in the space that I know have influence over property managers, and I will collaborate with them on content, or I'll allow them to

try a service that I offer for free and test it out and then give it all feedback so others can understand from their perspective what it was like to use that service.

Janice Hostager: 9:44

Love it. Love it. That's a great idea, even just to use Chat GPT to find potential clients. That's really smart. Okay, so how do you recommend? All right, so let's say you found somebody that you think would be a really good creator. So, what are some clues that they'd be a good fit in some and what are some maybe some red flags that they wouldn't be somebody that you should be using?

Sarah Stahl: 10:09

The first thing to consider is don't get wrapped up in audience size. That's not really a top concern because influence over a thousand people is more important than having 10,000 followers and influence over 1%, right? So it's really important to understand what content are they currently making? Um, do they share content that your client would save in their feed? You know, if they're scrolling through and they're like, oh, this is really helpful and I would save it, would your client save it? So does their tone fit with how you want people to feel? Um are they coming across within your brand tone? You know, some people are more edgy, some people are more laid back, some people are funny. So do they kind of share the same tone of how you present your business and share about your services? And then would you trust their recommendation? So usually creators can be found one through a search, right? So a hashtag in your niche or just maybe it's location based. And then you just kind of start watching. You watch their content, you watch for frequency, you watch for who's engaging, who's saving their stuff, that kind of thing. And you can kind of get a feel for that over time. So it's not an instantaneous decision that's made. It's something that you kind of feel out over a little bit over time. Maybe, maybe a month. You give it a month, you kind of watch them and see how things go. So some red flags to look out for is there does their audience engagement look fake? Um, you know, there's it's hard, it's really hard to tell if audiences were purchased by and are bots and engagements are bought. So there are some AI tools that help with that. Most of them are paid. Um, some of them are small subscription fees to large subscription fees. But if you really care about seeing if audience growth happens too fast, it's usually a purchased audience and not something you want to participate in. If their content feels off-brand or chaotic, like you're like, I don't know really what they stand for, I don't really know what their core message is, even if they post a lot, you're looking for alignment too, not just eyeballs or you're looking for that influence. And the influence comes from clarity and message, and people like know that they can rely on that clarity of message. Um, so if they promote everything, like if they look like they're working with all kinds of brands and they're just like trying to get brand deal after brand deal, it's it's actually a red flag to - I watched a YouTube video one time about how YouTube works with creators, and it's actually a red

flag if a creator jumps products frequently instead of like develops those deeper relationships over time. So basically, if you're looking forward to their values and the way they do business operate with yours because you're looking at them like a partner a little bit, you know, not just somebody who can like, hey, share my stuff with your audience. You know, there's going to be an education process for them to use your product or your service. Um there's another company I'm actually partnered with, they're called Magnetic, and they're a Web3 uh company that basically helps you develop a community on the blockchain and then track everything your community does. So they are a startup, they've been in development for a little over a year now, and they've given me complimentary access to the back end of their site, and I'm always testing it, playing with it, building with it. So I'll have like quarterly calls with their development team to talk out like, hey, I don't understand this, and this is some of the issues that I've found. So that's not even something public that I do. Um, it more like is behind the scenes, but I'm working with them in this partnership as they develop their service as well, um, so that when they're ready for a big launch, I'll be there. I understand, I understand exactly what they do well, and I could be a voice to help help them in that process.

Janice Hostager: 14:25

Gotcha. Oh, that sounds awesome. So, what does success look like for a creator? So let's so as a business owner, let's say I reached out to somebody, maybe they wouldn't even consider themselves an influencer. Maybe it's just somebody that I feel like has a lot of power. They they have a lot of influence, we'll say that. So, how is it that first of all, I've reached out with them, they've done a little work for me, or they haven't done work yet. Let's say that. Let's say I'm just trying to figure out how I would measure success. I was just wondering if it was like sales or awareness or engagement, or how how is it that you would actually figure out about it all of the events?

Sarah Stahl: 15:05

Okay. So you can't measure everything in this scenario. So you want to measure as much as you can without overwhelming your system or overwhelming the creator. So one of the low-hanging fruits is if your system has the ability to develop a coupon code of any sort, one of the things we do is we'll create a custom coupon code for the creator to give out. So maybe it's five, it's usually 5% off of something, right? It's just like a nominal little fee, a nominal little coupon or savings fee that can be applied, but it's tracked back to a coupon. So that's one thing that you can do over time because as the story develops, as the creator learns more about who you are and what you can do, content will come out over time, right? So maybe you work with this creator for a year and it takes three to six months before a coupon code is used, right? So that that's one way. Another way is just the storytelling process. So do you see clear storytelling resulting in key triggers? Like, are is your audience growing as a result of that clarity of storytelling? Are people signing up for your lead magnet? And even in the lead magnet

sign up, you could say, like, who where you heard, you know, where you heard from us or from, and you could even add the a creator's name in there or some kind of indication that that came from the creator. So there's ways that you can build that in, but I don't think I think the biggest mistake is expecting a creator to come out the gate first time one piece of content and think magic is gonna happen. It's not. And I think that that's why people don't really believe in the power of influencer marketing because they're thinking, oh, I have to hire someone big to to come out and do this one thing to make this big splash. To build the influence and to break through to earn people's trust, it actually has to happen naturally and organically over time. So, what does that look like? Maybe you work with the creator and they you give them free access to your service and you say, Hey, go ahead and try this, my service. I don't know, maybe it's like a six-week course. You say, Go ahead and take the six-week course. I'd love to work with you on this, and then I'll give you the course for free. You go through the course, you develop your own story, and then come back and we'll discuss, you know, what that story looks like, right? So they actually need time to digest all of the information that you're putting out there as well. So understanding that, you know, just like it took you a lot of time to build out that course or build out that program, it's gonna take the creator some time to develop their side of the story. And then the second piece to that would be allow them to tell it in their story, right? You've already chosen them through that process of, hey, I've watched their content, I think they've got some great influence, we align in our values and kind of our tone of voice. So you already believe in all that and you already know that, but they still have an angle to take. And that's actually where the trust is built when they are able to speak in their own voice and their own angle, and it's not curated by you.

Janice Hostager: 18:37

Gotcha. So let's talk a little bit about the storytelling part of it since I know that's a focus of yours too. So can you walk us through what a story-driven influencer post or creator post looks like? I mean, did they develop one on their own? Do you ask them to include certain things? Or uh yeah. So what makes it land?

Sarah Stahl: 18:56

I would give them a three-part framework for this. Okay. But I would give them the framework to stay within, but give them full reign to use their own voice and freedom to use their own voice. They're not always gonna say everything you want them to say, and they're not always gonna say it the way you would say it. You've got to be okay with that first and foremost. So giving them a framework that you're comfortable with, and then just letting them do that is good. So the first thing is have them highlight a relatable moment. So something that your audience already feels that they have also felt and that they have discovered the solution to in your in your service, right? So the next is a shift. The service changed how I X, right? So keeping that really basic thought of like how the

service changed how I work out, how it helped change how I present myself in speaking, you know, whatever the service is it is. So just focus, have them focus on the shift. And then the third one would be a clear outcome. So what actually improved? It lands because it's about them, not about you. That's what all three of those things are. A relate a relatable moment, a shift, and a clear outcome are all about the the things that are addressing pain points with your customer, and then you just kind of let them develop from there.

Janice Hostager: 20:23

That's good. So, what about compensation? So, do you offer, like you mentioned, a free course? Is that kind of the standard? I've never used an influencer, so I don't even know this, any of this. Or is it something that you can offer them like an affiliate commission?

Sarah Stahl: 21:51

So this is up to the business owner, really. And I like to get as creative as possible. And when there's no proof of concept, right? So maybe it's a new, let's say it's a new course, and there's no real proof of concept, I would err on giving it away for free and letting X amount of people try it under the guise of, hey, these are the three points that I would like for you to cover in this many posts. There you go, kind of thing, just keeping it simple. So then it depends. Like, are you somebody who's a little more known and you're looking to take it to the next level? Then I would tap into my customer base and I would say something like, Hey, I'm developing a new X, you know, and you've already done this. Would you be willing to test it out for me in exchange for these things? I don't like any first relationship or first touch point, I should say, with the creator to be paid. Because you don't really know. You don't, you're you're really vetting your a potential partner, is what you're doing, right? A potential business partner, kind of.

Janice Hostager: 22:58

Right.

Sarah Stahl: 22:58

So I like to always offer as much as I possibly can, but not a not anything paid. So let's say you offer 10 people this freedom course, they've agreed to do this exchange and focus on those three points in their content creation process, and two of them blow you away. They go above and beyond. They end up, you know, signing up for people with their coupon code. You know, you you go into who is performing really well, who gets it. You just keep leaning into those and doubling down on them. So from there, then I would say, Hey, this went so well. You actually made me some money here. How do you feel about doing something at a little more frequent cadence? Maybe you start with like once a month, they do a reel for you or something like that at this price. So the goal is to use it as a way to develop long-term relationship, but I don't like to start there because you don't know how the content's gonna land. You don't know who's got what energy.

You you don't really know until you see the final product, and you kind of have to let them do their thing to get to the final product.

Janice Hostager: 24:13

Okay.

Sarah Stahl: 24:13

Is that kind of standard operating procedure with people who- I don't I've heard I do everything differently, so I don't I don't know. In fact, with the properties that I work with, uh I require a fee. The the creators actually pay us because we have big overhead, right? We've got like you're coming to the property, we have manpower behind us, we have housekeepers, you know, we have all kinds of things going on that are costing us a lot of money to have you stay here. So for the property scenario, I ask all the creators to cover the cost of the clean fee to stay. And and all the properties I work with are you know pretty expensive to stay. So it's it's kind of nominal to pay a clean fee, but that way we're not losing any money. So you would have to look at that depending on it's a little easier to give access to a free course for a service, but when you're dealing with product, you kind of have to look at what's coming in and out to make it feasible for the for the business as well, because you're you're protecting the business and trying to build a relationship.

Janice Hostager: 25:20

Right, right. And obviously, if you are selling a product, let's say you sell lotion or something like that, you're gonna need to get that into their hands to try it before they can endorse it. So I think that seems a little more obvious, but you're right. With services, it's a little different and definitely with product management.

Sarah Stahl: 25:37

Yes.

Janice Hostager: 25:38

With with hospitality management or hospitality industry, then it's a little different.

Sarah Stahl: 25:43

It's a little different. And so specifically, I've done this myself. The creators I've worked with have been on the hospitality space, or and you know, this works really well. And I've heard a lot of people tell me that they've never seen it done like that before. Typically, what happens, in fact, the client I'm working with now, they were paying influencers to stay. And we just shifted the whole thing. There's no more paid to stay, not on the first day. You know, there's a clean fee now incorporated, and we'll see how you perform. And if you perform well, then we're gonna open up the doors for some other opportunities.

Janice Hostager: 26:22

Yeah, I think that's brilliant. And if it works, go for it, right?

Sarah Stahl: 26:26

And and you never know. Like that's the interesting thing about people. And I'm not gonna get too much on AI, you know, making everything so boring, but that's the interesting thing about people is they're so creative. You know, when you let them see creative, they're so creative and you don't really know, and you just have to kind of flow with how how things are going.

Janice Hostager: 26:47

Yeah. So if my listener, who is so busy with a lot of different things, if they only have the energy to do one tiny step toward creative partnerships, where would they start?

Sarah Stahl: 26:59

I bet that there's already somebody that they admire who is a parallel, parallel partner already. Everybody scrolls on TikTok or Instagram at night. You know, so I'm sure that there's somebody out there that they're like, hmm, I really like their voice. They're in the industry, I like what they have to say. Um, I would just start to have a conversation. You know, just like, hey, I really authentic. Like, I really have been watching you for a little while and I like your voice and I and how you present yourself and it really feels aligned with what I'm doing. Are you aware of this program that I have? You have to be careful that they don't feel like you're selling anything to them. Um and and and then just say, like, hey, I I'm open to allowing you free access to this course to try it out in exchange for some content. Are you open to that as well? You know, and if you reached out to five people that you probably already have in your feed that you admire and think is a good match, you'd probably hear back a yes from two of them. Okay.

Janice Hostager: 28:08

Okay. Yeah, it seems like it's just a simple thing, but it is so powerful. And I think we really don't do enough of that as small business owners. We don't reach out enough. And even just collab any kind of collaboration with other business owners.

Sarah Stahl: 28:23

People love collaborating. They love it. I actually ask, I I'm a syndicate writer for Hotel Online, and I ask a different person on my network every week. Like I'll see them post something, and I'm like, oh my gosh, that's such a good topic. And then I'll approach them very thoughtfully and say, Hey, do you want to collaborate with me on this article? I'll take, I'll take everything on. I just need your voice in this way. And that actually has boosted my visibility because I'm always pulling people in. You want to pull people in. I think solopreneurs forget that. And we carry all the weight of the business development process on our shoulders. And we really we can't do it all by ourselves. It's too much.

Janice Hostager: 29:04

Oh, absolutely. And especially if you're we're dealing with somebody with a much larger audience, it's just a no-brainer. I mean, that's one of the easiest ways to grow your reach as well. So where can people find out more about you, Sarah?

Sarah Stahl: 29:17

Yeah, the easiest way is my website, SarahStahl.com. That's S-T-A-H-L.

Janice Hostager: 29:23

Perfect. All right. I'll put the link to that in the show notes as well. Thank you so much, Sarah, for joining us today. I appreciate you.

Sarah Stahl: 29:32

Thank you. It's great to be here with you.

Janice Hostager: 29:34

So, does Sarah's tips make you want to dip your toe into the influencer waters? If you do, let me know. I'd love to hear about it. Just go ahead and send a DM to Janice Hostager Marketing. And of course, hit the follow button. To learn more about Sarah or anything we talked about today, visit myweeklymarketing.com forward slash one thirty-eight. Thanks so much for joining me today. I'll see you next time. Bye for now.