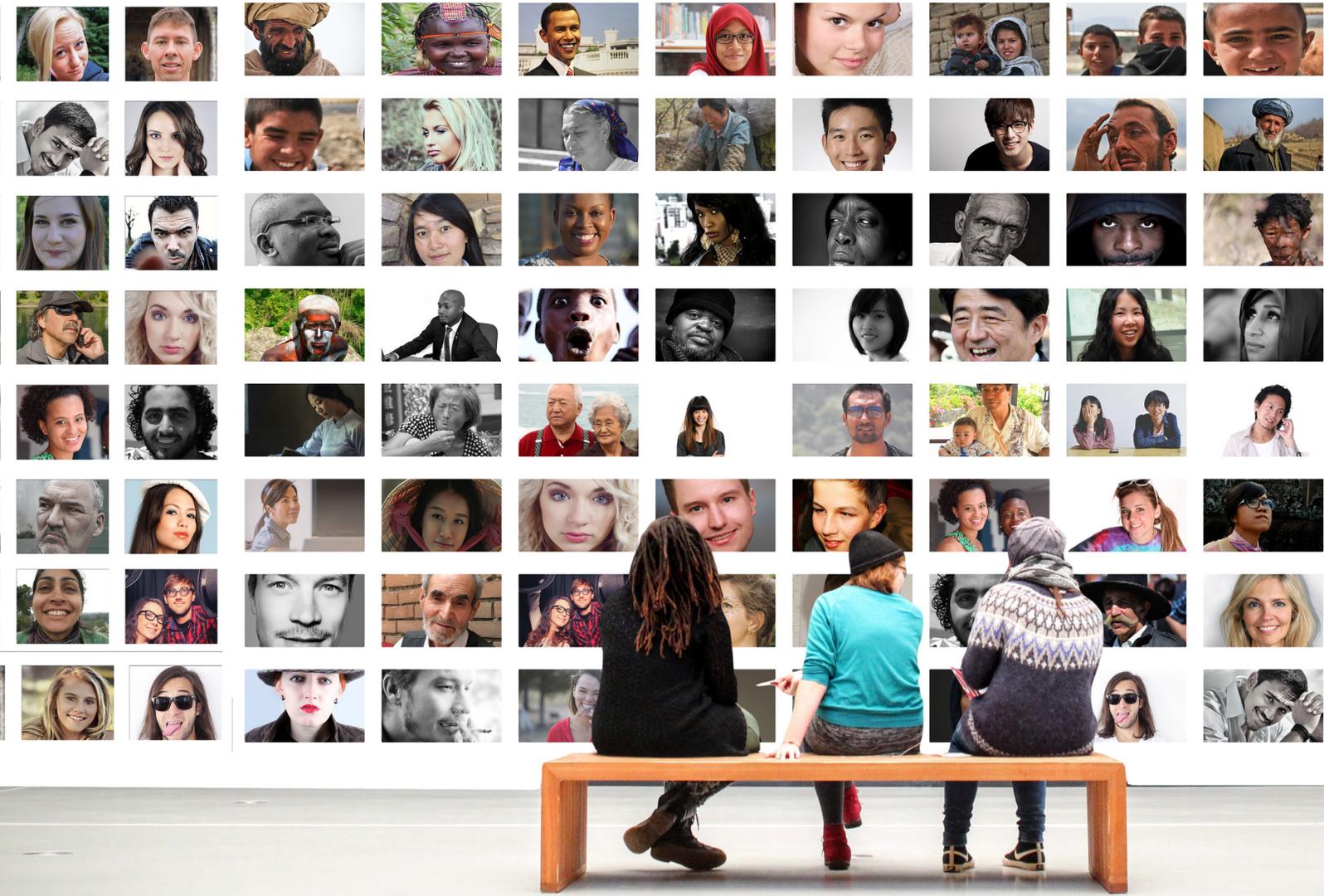




TRAVEL MINDSET
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An In-Depth Guide on Influencer Vetting

How to Detect Fake Followers, Choose the Best Partners,
and Set Yourself Up for a Wildly Successful Campaign

by Jade Broadus, *Creative Director*

Influencer marketing is here to stay, and it's no wonder why – for tourism brands, it results in an average of \$12.54 in earned media value for every \$1 in investment.

Still, a lot of marketers struggle to see that level of return. Why? Influencer marketing is only that effective when your brand leverages the *right* partnership with the *right* influencer. That's easier said than done.

For tourism brands, influencer marketing results in an average of **\$12.54** in earned media value for every \$1 in investment.."

[SOURCE]

Despite a recent interest in micro-influencers, a lot – possibly even the majority – of decision makers continue to fall into the trap of thinking “the more followers, the better,” without considering many (or any) other factors.

While the number of people that follow an influencer is important, it's not the only information that determines whether or not they are a good fit for your brand or campaign goals.

In fact, I've seen this number blind many talented marketing professionals, causing them to work with someone who isn't the best choice and – because a larger following typically comes with higher fees – overpaying in the process.

This also assumes an influencer's following is authentic, but there are many ways someone can manipulate his or her audience, including buying followers. Brands must dive deeper and take a look behind the scenes to ensure an influencer is followed by real people. Even then, a large following doesn't guarantee success.

How can vetting make you more successful?

Your success has significantly more to do with an influencer's audience demographics, what he or she is passion about, and his or her skills when it comes to content creation than it does with their number of followers.

If you don't vet influencers against these factors, your campaign will fail to perform as well as it could have and could leave you or your higher ups doubting the entire strategy.

The truth is, researching and selecting influencers takes time. And while platforms and automated software can help speed up the process, proper vetting requires human oversight to determine if someone is worth the investment.

The Secret to Successful Influencer Vetting

Data Analysis + Human Insight

After years of building relationships with influencers and planning and executing influencer marketing campaigns for our clients, the Travel Mindset team has developed a four step process that combines automated data analysis with the sort of contextual human insight that can't be replicated by machine learning.

We'll discuss that process in this guide, but before you begin, you must take time to really understand the influencer's role – not just the sort of quick definition you'll find in an article or blog post, but a thoughtful explanation that answers, **"Why are we doing this in the first place?"**

What makes an influencer?

An influencer is a content creator with a passionate point of view that other people feel deeply connected to, almost the same sort of affinity you'd have for a friend or family member. That connection is powerful – so much so that influencers have the ability to affect their followers' moods, lifestyles, preferences, and, ultimately, purchasing decisions.

The influencer-follower relationship is based on trust. When a follower believes that an influencer genuinely cares about his or her fans – and prioritizes that relationship over getting rich quick – they are open to sponsored content and take their recommendations to heart, just as they would if a friend had suggested it.

Are all influencers created equal?

The short answer is no. There are several levels of influencers, and each level can help you achieve different KPIs (key performance indicators).

Celebrities and macro-influencers tend to work best for increasing brand awareness. Sometimes they focus on one subject, but more often they cover a wide variety of topics and products. When working with these influencers, your primary goal should not be sales or engagement, but rather reaching the most people you can and introducing (or reintroducing) them to what you have to offer.

Micro-influencers have a smaller but often significantly more loyal following. Their fans tend to be much more engaged and in many cases, they will buy (or at least seriously consider) almost any product that influencer endorses. This is the closest you'll find to a true "friend" relationship; followers feel like they can relate to the influencer and are part of an exclusive community of like-minded people.

Keep in mind, true micro-influencers can be the most difficult to discover with automated software, for a couple of reasons. First, they have a smaller following so they aren't going to trigger an algorithm based solely on follower counts. Second, while platforms can detect engagement rates, it's very difficult to quantify loyalty.

For example, a commenter tagging his or her friend might indicate, “Hey, I think you should consider this product (because I trust this influencer’s opinion and I know you’re in the market for something similar.)” Or it could simply mean, “Hey, this just made me laugh, and I thought you might need a laugh, too.” Only a human can spot the difference.

Last but not least, and perhaps most importantly, micro-influencers tend to come with lower sponsorship fees, so talent agencies and platforms that work on a commission model simply aren’t motivated to suggest them – even when they are the best choice for your needs.

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Finally, **mid-tier influencers** offer the best of both worlds: they give you access to a larger group of people than micro-influencers, but most likely their followers are still interested in a specific niche. Most of the audience will be fairly loyal, but they may not feel as friendly or exclusive of a connection as they would with a micro-influencer.

Experts and industry thought leaders tend to fall into this camp, though there are exceptions in both directions. They serve a particular professional niche, and partnering with them is a great way to establish your brand’s credibility.

At Travel Mindset, we usually suggest partnering with a mix of influencers at different levels, unless you have very specific goals that lend themselves to one group. The reason being is that they all play important roles in the path to purchase, and working with a few micro-influencers can be an effective way to offset the higher fees of a macro-influencer.

The most important thing to take away is that one group is not inherently better than the other. This is especially true if your gut tells you more followers always makes for a better partner or you find yourself starting to believe micro-influencers are your best bet 100% of the time.

Who should you work with? Like every other marketing strategy, **it depends** - on several factors, including your brand, your objectives, and your budget.

Travel Mindset's Four Step Vetting Process

Now that we've gotten some terminology out of the way, we can dig into the process we use to vet influencers for every client campaign. Here's the quick summary:

Step 1: Confirm their content and voice are a fit for your brand.

Step 2: Evaluate their audience engagement and demographics.

Step 3: Eliminate influencers that have manipulated their following.

Step 4: The Human Touch: context, references, and relationships

1 IS THEIR CONTENT THE RIGHT FIT FOR YOUR BRAND?

While it may seem like figuring out if an influencer has fake followers should be the first step, we start by looking at an influencer's content from a brand match perspective.

This is usually the easiest information to pick up on, and if the content is off, there is no reason to spend any more time vetting them. This step includes some (or all) of the following actions:

- Pull up each of their social channels and if applicable, their blog. Does the content match the tone and niche of your brand? Have they published sponsored content in the past? If so, was it well received?
- Are pictures in focus? Are they artistic? Do they appear professionally edited? Bottom line: do their photos inspire you? This is especially important for travel brands. If they don't inspire you, they probably aren't connecting with your target buyers, regardless of their audience's size or make up.
- Do their captions tell a story or do they tend to only include a snippet of unrelated information (like a quote)?

- Do they use language that you wouldn't want associated with your brand? Do they reference topics that are off-brand or, worse, threaten brand safety?
- Does the influencer post videos? (This could be an essential qualifying factor if you're planning a campaign featuring video.)

Go through this checklist for each social media channel and their blogs or vlogs. You'll know pretty quickly if the content is a good fit for your brand and whether or not to add them to your list of potential partners.

2 IS THEIR AUDIENCE A GOOD FIT FOR YOUR CAMPAIGN?

Once you've decided a potential influencer's content is a good fit for your brand, take a deeper dive into their followers. The easiest way to do this is to pull up each social media account and click on their follower counts.

Ask these questions on each social media platform:

- Do most of the influencer's followers have their own followers and publish their own posts? Some bot accounts are natural, but the first sign an influencer has paid for fake followers is having a large number of fans that lack profile photos.
- Does their audience fit your campaign goals? A hotel brand seeking to raise travel intent among families may want to partner with Mommy bloggers, even if previous influencer relationships targeted high-earning millennials. This is an exaggerated example, but even a slight change in messaging should trigger the vetting process. This is why we vet for each campaign (as opposed to each client).
- Does the influencer respond to comments? Is there evidence of a real relationship between the influencer and his or her followers? This might be more important for campaigns focusing on engagement and less important for campaigns designed to drive awareness.

- Does it look like different people are commenting, or is it the same group over and over again? They might be in a comment pod, which tricks algorithms into showing more people their posts. This isn't necessarily a reason not to work with them, but you definitely want to see more than just the same group of people commenting on a regular basis.

3 FLUSH OUT THE FAKES.

By this step, you've probably already seen evidence of manipulation, whether that means fake followers or inflated engagement, for some of your potential partners. You can strike anyone with obvious issues from your list, but you should still take time to confirm your other options aren't playing the same game, only better.

There are a lot of platforms that claim they can quickly and easily tell you if a person has fake followers or fake likes. We use some of these programs as a **starting point** ourselves. [Socialblade.com](https://socialblade.com), for example, will tell you if an influencer's audience has grown slowly over time or if they have suspicious spikes in their growth.

Some spikes are legitimate, like getting more followers after an influencer was profiled by a media outlet, mentioned by a more influential account, or participated in a giveaway competition. A Google search will show you where and when they've been featured. If spikes still don't match up, it may indicate that they bought followers during that timeframe.

Resources like this should **only** be used **after** you've done your due diligence with the steps above. It's also important to note we do not stop the vetting process just because someone has made it this far. Real follower counts can be manipulated almost as easily as buying fake followers.

The only thing that is always true of influencers (at any level) is that they are never popular exclusively on only one platform. While most prefer to interact with the majority of their audience using one channel, like a blog or Instagram account, their Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, or YouTube profile should have a sizeable audience as well.

Why? Because when someone is truly influential, fans will naturally want to follow them around the web, and when someone is serious about treating their influence as a business, they will naturally want to diversify how they interact with their fans. Only after we've evaluated **all** of these factors are we satisfied that someone is the real deal, which brings us to our last – and most important – step.

4 THE HUMAN TOUCH

This step is the most time consuming but also the most impactful. It's also the one that can't be automated by software. Before we work with any influencer, we arrange an in-person meeting or, if schedules or time zones make it impossible, a call to get to know them.

We ask how they got into the industry and what they're passionate about, and we are careful to value their time – don't expect to be taken seriously by an influencer if you aren't willing to discuss a potential sponsorship, including deliverables and fees.

These meetings should answer:

- Is this person enthusiastic about potentially working together? It shows you they take the relationship seriously, which usually means it will be easier to work with them down the line.
- How does the person carry himself or herself? Is this someone you'd hire to work with customers? Most influencers are free spirits, but the best partners are able to balance professionalism with creativity.

- How long have they been in the industry? How did they get started? This is a good time to ask about any spikes in growth that you couldn't quite justify during your research. These questions will help you spot fakes that have fallen through the cracks; it's difficult to concoct a history of hard work out of thin air.
- Will they provide references from clients or other influencers? Sometimes you can get a great deal by being the first to sponsor a micro-influencer, but if another influencer won't vouch for them, that's a red flag.
- Finally, ask about their workflow to ensure their processes align with how you plan and execute your campaigns. Many people rush into a partnership and realize they have conflicting working styles before it's too late.

You should leave the conversation knowing more about the influencer's personality and work history and have a sense of their professionalism and approach to work. None of this is taken into account on automated platforms or discernible just by looking at their feeds. Finally, be sure to reach out to their references just as you would a normal job interview.

“Short cuts make long delays.”

-J.R.R. Tolkien

Tolkien's saying holds true for influencer marketing. Vetting like I've described here takes time, as it should. Influencers can play a powerful role in your marketing playbook – but only with careful planning.

Just as you take time to research and evaluate each facet of your marketing plan, you should take time to consider each influencer investment and how a partnership would work within your larger marketing strategy.



Jade Broadus is the creative director at Travel Mindset, an influencer marketing agency that specializes in the tourism industry. Broadus is an award-winning blogger and has managed more than 200 custom influencer marketing campaigns since joining Travel Mindset in 2012.



INCOMPLETE VETTING WILL LEAVE YOU WITH CAMPAIGNS THAT FAIL TO PERFORM. TRAVEL MINDSET CAN HELP YOU FIND THE BEST INFLUENCERS FOR YOUR CAMPAIGN AND ENSURE YOU KNOCK YOUR KPIS OUT OF THE PARK.

Want to learn more? Let's chat at go@travelmindset.com.

"The team at Travel Mindset understands what it takes to execute an effective integrated marketing campaign. From the standpoint of a content creator, they're a dream to work with—effective at communicating deliverables and quick to respond when questions arise."

—Kristen Luna, CamelsAndChocolate.com