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Summary

How Influencers Can Gain Followers and Boost Engagement

"The first thing I did to become a fitness influencer was open an Instagram account. And that was also the only thing I needed to do to become a reputable fitness influencer ... I don't need a degree from a university I was too dumb to get into. I've got abs."

—Social media entrepreneur's fitness influencer parody video

When aspiring entrepreneur Ashley Y. Roccapriore started her fitness and nutrition company in 2015, she, like many aspiring influencers, turned to Instagram to promote it. She diligently posted recipes and workout videos. It didn't take long for her to realize other people were sharing her posts—and profiting from them.

"People were taking my material and repurposing it," Roccapriore said. "I didn't understand how this could happen, how people could get my plans, use them, post them, and get more followers." Her bewilderment prompted the University of Tennessee PhD candidate to research how different modes of communicating on social media lead to different levels of engagement with followers.

In the *Academy of Management Journal* article, "[I Don't Need a Degree, I've Got Abs: Influencer Warmth and Competence, Communication Mode, and Stakeholder Engagement on Social Media](#)," Roccapriore and University of Tennessee professor [Timothy G. Pollock](#) used Instagram to study the effects of visual images and word-based communication on stakeholder engagement. After following hundreds of social media entrepreneurs in the fitness and nutrition industry for six months, they learned:

- Images are the key to amassing followers.
- Words and comments fuel meaningful engagement with followers, but don't necessarily attract more followers.

Pollock cited the parody influencer video quoted above as actually offering a core insight. "The visual can be very powerful. Seeing something is sometimes all you need to hit the 'Follow' button. We don't look further."

However, he said, if you want a more meaningful relationship with followers, it's best to supplement images with positive emotional words that tell stories, boost [motivation](#) by focusing on others, or share personal information. "Social media is designed to addict and also distract us," Pollock said. "But if I interact with something, if I comment on a post, I am immediately more engaged."



Millions of followers versus 10

Social media [entrepreneurs](#) are a relatively new wave of entrepreneurs whose businesses operate completely on social media platforms. Their success hinges on an alchemy of followers, interactions with brands linked to their industry, and online networking.

It does not necessarily hinge on entrepreneurs' credentials.

"There is no industry body governing the fitness industry," said Roccapiore, who earned fitness and nutrition certifications that qualify her to create custom fitness and nutrition plans for women. "How do you know that the people who are putting themselves out there to do this—coach people in exercise and diet choices—are actually qualified to do it?"

The [researchers followed](#) 488 social media entrepreneurs over six months to better understand why certain entrepreneurs gain more followers than others. They came away with three best practices for using social media to grow a brand and business:

1. **Create an online relationship with users.**

Entrepreneurs who post frequently, comment on their followers' pictures and posts, reply to comments on their own posts, and focus on others (not just themselves), create personal connections. Online relationships

matter on social media. Most users want to feel like they're building a community, not just putting their thoughts out into the void among millions of other users.

2. **Focus on getting users to respond positively to comments.** Their study found that social media entrepreneurs who use positive, [emotional](#) language, such as "Amazing, Stephanie! All your hard work is paying off," gained positive feedback from followers. This is key because Instagram generally uses engagement as a key metric in its algorithms to figure out where posts should be displayed on feeds.

3. **Choose images wisely.** Images are the first thing that people see before reading text. Choose photos that highlight exactly what is being sold. Post a photo depicting an exercise for a client or a client's "before and after" photo. Doing so helped fitness entrepreneurs increase followers by 2.7%. That is significant, considering that each additional follower can result in more revenue.

"It's a full-time job with relentless pressure to add new stuff to keep up," Roccapiore said. "People need to be strategic, so they show up in peoples' feeds. Interacting with people allows for personal connections that grow an entrepreneur's brand on social media."

Trust, morality, and warmth

One way to build a successful business online is for entrepreneurs to convince social media users that they are competent, trustworthy, and care about their followers. While previous research studied how entrepreneurs showed their competence through certifications, this article instead studied how fitness influencers conveyed their trustworthiness and morality—what psychologists refer to as "warmth."

From July 1 to December 31, 2019, the [researchers pored over](#) fitness influencers' posts, comments, and replies to comments, ultimately collecting 52,148 influencer posts, 8,730,714 follower comments, and 620,505 influencer replies to follower comments.

The more positive (using such hashtags as "[#onelifetolive](#)"; "[#noregrets](#)"; and "[#passionrules](#)") and other-focused (such as "You're stronger than you think. You got this" and "Just so you know—YOU ARE LIMITLESS!") their comments or replies were, the bigger the effect on positive interactions and, ultimately, engagement.



Equally, images bucketed into group images, which contained three or more people, and personal life images, which humanized the influencer by showing them with children or pets, had a significant effect on attracting followers.

Roccapriore's and Pollock's three main findings:

1. Images have a positive relationship with less mentally difficult engagement (following)
2. Words have a stronger positive relationship than images with more mentally difficult engagement (positive interactions).
3. Competence cues have a stronger influence than warmth cues related to the number of followers, and warmth cues have a stronger influence with positive interactions.

Pollock said he was surprised by the fact that not only did the type of content matter (words and images), but also by the positive effects from how these elements were combined.

"There's some nuance to this. Image-based competence cues are the most influential in attracting followers, and word-based warmth cues generate the most follower engagement. The images are impressive, but they can also create distance between the influencer and their followers," he explained. "Warm words humanize the influencer. The influencer might have a certification, or a body, that says 'I am competent,' but that can also create distance because they are so far away from what the follower looks like, or can do. Warm words humanize them. People gravitate to the people they most want to have a beer with. It's no different on Instagram."