

Keeping it real

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User generated content (UGC) has enormous marketing potential for your brand – here's how to lean into this resource as an effective amplifier on social media and why it should be an important part of your strategy.



When it comes to marketing, the shift in media use and the growth of new channels over the past few years has been extraordinary. It's exciting times for digital media agencies who are on top of trends and undoubtedly overwhelming for brands dipping their toes into these often-muddy waters. The paradigm has shifted from traditional advertising to a more interactive and authentic approach where creators play a pivotal role in shaping a brand's narrative and UGC is seeing enormous growth and potential.

Nicola Ashe is the strategic business director and partner at [The Digital Media Collective \(TDMC\)](#) and heads up the dynamic digital media agency's content creator division. She shares some of her insights into the mercurial world that is shaping media as we know it.

"UGC is the antidote to curation hype," says Ashe. Online content is now created daily by 'ordinary' people (some of whom have monetised their streams), who flight their brand-focused material on a variety of channels, including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube and Twitter/X. From beauty and lifestyle bloggers who share their tips and how-tos, to would-be comedians in the business of creating skits, or 'momfluencers' trying and testing new products from their shopping hauls, UGC creators create content based on their interests and aren't afraid to say how they feel about a brand either.

Unlike brand-created content, UGC exudes authenticity often born out of genuine experiences and personal narratives. Its unique format, ranging from unfiltered testimonials to creative collaborations, has the ability to capture an audience's attention by fostering relatable connections. In essence UGC can set new standards for organic and, importantly, peer-driven engagement. Edelman's Trust Barometer reveals that 76% of consumers consider content shared by average people to be more honest than content shared by brands. This shift in perception has forced marketers to reassess their

strategies, recognising the authenticity and relatability that UGC injects into campaigns.

Ashe agrees wholeheartedly: “We see more and more, especially on TikTok, that content doesn’t have to be over polished and curated for audiences to engage. Our clients want real and relatable content that sparks conversation and we work hard to source content creators who are dynamic and brave with their content, it’s an exciting time for us,” she says.

The South African context is particularly alive, says Ashe, who works with hundreds of content creators that she and her team personally vet and who are cherry picked to align with each client campaign: “We find that a semi-manual process is the only way we can truly vouch for our creators.” She says they try not to be too prescriptive on campaigns and often leave the content totally up to the creator. “We know they have good relationships with their audiences and the authenticity is what’s most important to us.”

For local brands, especially in the FMCG space, UGC can have incredible results, says Ashe. “Getting products into people’s hands who have a genuine affinity for it or who we know will be excited by it can translate into important amplification and market penetration for any brand,” she says, but it’s a fine line. “Giving products to content creators in exchange for content can definitely work in terms of perception management, but it can also devalue a brand, so we work hard to find a happy balance. We don’t believe in seeding products to hundreds of people at a time, so that content creator feeds are filled with the same type of content all at the same time.”

In a world where hyper-curated social media feeds were once the norm, UGC is a delightful and welcome counter offering. “From a brand perspective, partnering with people representing you in an authentic light is gold and we are thoroughly enjoying exploring this essential marketing approach with our clients. We find that clients get so much more bang for their buck – glossy photo shoots are expensive and heavy on resources and the content all looks the same and the brand tires of it quickly.

“Content creators can lighten that load while expanding brand awareness to niches they may not have been able to access traditionally,” says Ashe. With more than 20 million South Africans having access to a smartphone, UGC is an ideal playground for brands wanting to meaningfully engage with them: “UGC starts a conversation and that is half the battle won.”

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