

Amplify Your Impact
Yvonne Dooley, Col. Ed.

Creating a Bespoke Approach to Community Engagement

Influencer Marketing for 21st Century Libraries and Archives

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Let's face it. The past few years in library and archives land have been extremely trying for everyone, whether you are a seasoned professional with extensive experience, a new colleague, or a customer. The pandemic, budget austerity, divisive political environment, and onslaught of attempts to censor inclusive stories from school libraries, public libraries, and K-12 and post-secondary curricula have taken a significant toll.¹ As digital connections played an essential role in keeping our institutions relevant during the first 12–18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, our profession is having a renaissance in understanding how to leverage social media to amplify positive stories about our people, collections, services, and communities. It is high time for information professionals—beyond just communications, marketing, and community engagement-focused colleagues—to formally understand the power of influencer marketing in deepening sustained engagement with users.

Since 2023, America has been exposed to the reinvigorated concept of "Library Joy," made famous by the librarian Mychal Threets (@mychal3ts), among countless other information professionals active on social media. Extensive media coverage (including in *Rolling Stone* magazine), viral social media content, and even a line of merchandise from [Out of Print](#) signal that Threets' message resonates with the public and serves as a solid counter to the coordinated effort to chip away at the freedom to read. This content creation and seemingly organic engagement with an industry influencer is much more strategic and deliberate than many may realize. Threets' rise to fame is without question the influencer marketing story of the moment, building on the TikTok excellence modeled by Milwaukee Public Library since 2020, and the Linda Lindas' 2021 "Viral Library Gig" (NPR) at the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) that led to a record deal.²

This column observes how influencer marketing is utilized in the information profession for customized engagement efforts while demystifying how to do the work. The discussion offers a definition of "influencer marketing" as applicable for libraries and archives, explores several case studies of effective influencer engagement, and establishes a playbook that institutions can adapt to start, grow, or sustain their influencer strategy. Libraries and archives of any size or type should

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consider adopting influencer marketing to serve their strategic communications and community engagement goals, whether they have one staff member or 3,000.

What is Influencer Marketing?

Influencer marketing is a relatively recent subspecialty of marketing that has taken hold in the digital age, yet the principles are as old as advertising. Leveraging celebrity or individual influence has been a part of modern society since the 18th century, when—according to *Forbes*—the Wedgwood company in Great Britain marketed royal endorsement of their products to prospective customers. Peter Suci observes that what we now recognize as social media influencers emerged as a trend and concept in the mid-2010s with the rapid growth of major social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and YouTube.³ Communications and marketing professionals, and anyone interested in this area of expertise, can now take university or massive open online (MOOC) courses in influencer marketing. There is also a growing professional and scholarly literature that analyzes the role and power of influencer marketing, primarily produced in the communications and marketing field.

Influencers are prevalent in communicating about any industry that relies upon engagement or transactions between an entity and individuals to exist and thrive. In any local community, you can find food, literary, real estate, travel, cultural, political, sports, and education influencers, among countless others. Chan-Olmsted and Kim describe influencer marketing as follows: “The practice markets influence by capitalizing on key individuals’ persuasive power over their social networks.”⁴ The concept is quite simple and is something that many information institutions and related entities have engaged in for decades. What is different now is that the role of influencer has been somewhat democratized through social media. In decades past, the term influencer would have only applied to celebrities or people with a certain social stature. In contrast, now there are influencers of all ages “breaking the internet” with viral content that builds their following and formalizes the value of their platform(s) to prospective entities trying to reach their audiences.

A prime example of this phenomenon is Marcus Johnson, a student at Oakland University in Michigan, whose post-Vice-Presidential Debate MSNBC interview on October 1, 2024, went viral for its hilarity and frankness about the 2024 presidential election campaign. Now known as “civics guy,” Johnson’s voice now has significant national reach among civically engaged social media users. A single TikTok post on MSNBC’s account about Johnson has 2.2 million views and his [X account](#) grew to almost 50,000 followers in less than a week.⁵ There are always new people assuming informal or formal status as influencers.

Libraries and archives have engaged in influencer marketing for decades. The American Library Association’s (ALA) beloved celebrity “READ” posters are a perennial favorite at the national level. Dating back to 1980 with an inaugural appearance by Mickey Mouse and formalized as a series in 1985, the posters can be found in many school and public libraries across the country, always featuring recognizable entertainers, civic leaders, and pop culture characters, ranging from Taylor Swift to Snoopy.⁶ The posters are an iconic tool for broadly promoting literacy to multigenerational audiences. Many US-based readers undoubtedly recall seeing these posters at some point in their youth, speaking to the impact of their sustained qualitative impact.

Another staple of library influencer marketing is the library card (wallet-sized or jumbo) photo. In the social media era to date, LAPL has led the way with this tactic, showcasing Hollywood and entertainment industry endorsements of the library and what it stands for (who does not get a kick out of seeing [Keanu Reeves](#) in a public library with the iconic LAPL card?). While these more

traditional expressions of celebrity endorsement continue to benefit libraries and archives, influencer marketing as a practice is much more complex than simply posting a photo on a library's social media accounts. It involves recruiting and engaging with a wide range of individuals with sizable influence and/or following among specific communities with whom a library or archive hopes to develop a stronger connection. All parties involved come to an agreement about what content will be generated, where it will be posted, and what type of engagement is sought.

A library and archive-specific definition of influencer marketing is necessary to embrace this work. Influencer marketing is the practice of collaborating with influential individuals—via their social media accounts, both within and outside a library or archive—to showcase an institution's work and to deepen connections with the communities served by the influencers. The evolution of the connections that influencer marketing cultivates can be observed through quantitative and qualitative measures based on strategic communications and marketing goals. It is not enough to simply engage influencers to interview authors or promote special initiatives like summer reading and engagement. An influencer marketing program should have specific goals across short and long-term timelines, even if the goals are as simple as increasing library engagement among one cultural community on a single social media platform.

Modeling Influencer Marketing

“La Comunidad Reads” by DC Public Library and @Lupita.Reads

DC Public Library (DCPL) has collaborated with iconic queer Mexican book influencer Lupita Aquino (@Lupita.Reads on Instagram, Threads, X, and TikTok) for more than five years through various programming collaborations, including a [book club series](#) on Latine immigration experiences presented in partnership with Washington Performing Arts, Politics and Prose, and Solid State Books in 2019. Since 2023, DCPL and Aquino have presented “[La Comunidad Reads](#),” a series of Latine author events “set to showcase and amplify Latine voices in literature, highlighting the richness and diversity of their works.” In the series announcement, Aquino describes the initiative's goal as “to turn every page into a dialogue and every word into an opportunity for connection.”⁷ Events have featured prominent authors from across the US-based Latine writer community, including Alejandro Varela, Angie Cruz, Jaquira Díaz, Alex Espinoza, and Vanessa Angélica Villarreal. Aquino moderates the events, and she regularly promotes them on her social media accounts. She also promotes the series in her own media appearances, which provides additional exposure for the joint initiative with DCPL.

What makes this collaboration valuable for DCPL and its customers? Aquino helps DCPL curate desirable and relevant programming. She brings in an audience that will trust her recommendations about the library's direct marketing efforts, and her commitment to inclusive and accessible programming matches DCPL's. Aquino is one of the most revered book influencers in the country who focuses on uplifting Latine authors for a wide range of readers. She has been featured by *The Today Show* and NPR, and collaborates with major publishers. Aquino's social media reach, 47,000+ Instagram followers and 67,100+ TikTok followers, is massive. Her partnership with DCPL ensures that the library's programming is increasingly visible to Washington, DC, area residents interested in Latine literature, but also ensures that DCPL's inclusive literary programming is visible to library workers, book influencers, and publishing industry influencers across the country.

Elevating Library Workers

Across the country, libraries, archives, and cultural institutions are embracing the concept of influencer marketing, both by engaging “external influencers” (outside voices to champion their work) and elevating their stories through social media accounts of “internal influencers” (individual leaders and information professionals from within). National leaders like the Librarian of Congress Dr. Carla Hayden (@LibnofCongress and @LibrarianofCongress, active on X, Threads, and Instagram), and LAPL’s City Librarian John Szabo (@BiblioSzabo, active on X, Threads, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn), provide two notable examples of how individual library leaders develop substantial national and international social media followings that provide a distinct glimpse into the day-to-day work of their institutions. The influential voices from within the library and archives community help maintain the perception of trust in our institutions.

One of the great librarians to follow on social media today is Jamar Rahming, executive director of the Wilmington (DE) Public Library. Rahming’s social media accounts—including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, reach many influential library and cultural leaders in his network. He and his team were recently named 2024 Library Journal Marketer of the Year for their “holistic, inclusive, and imaginative promotional efforts, driven by Rahming’s belief that culture has the power to enlarge everyone’s world.”⁸ The work Rahming leads is trendsetting, partly because of who he reaches and influences on social media with his informative, personal messaging about Wilmington Public Library’s headliner programming. Rahming’s follower count is highest on LinkedIn, reaching more than 7,000 influential professionals nationwide. He communicates in an authentic way to thousands of decision-makers and creative individuals who can learn from his best practices and adapt them to their local settings.

Many libraries and archives have social media influencers within their ranks, beyond the leadership level. Hawa Jalloh, a talented librarian at the Prince George’s County Memorial Library System (PGCMLS) in Maryland, built and maintains a solid following (10,200+ as of October 6, 2024) as a book influencer using the handle @HawaReads on Instagram (known as a “bookstagrammer”), Threads, and X. Jalloh’s influencer niche is elevating Black authors and stories, which is reflected in her personal content and content she contributes to her library’s official platforms (which she also shares on her personal accounts). Jalloh and several colleagues from PGCMLS were featured in 2023 in a [TikTok video](#), developed by the library’s award-winning Public Relations Department for their “Rock Banned” campaign, which featured a cameo by President Barack Obama.⁹ This video shared a fun, positive message about the importance of the freedom to read in an uplifting way that reached a national and international audience, including through Obama Foundation and American Library Association platforms. Influencers like Hawa choose to elevate their employer’s work on their personal accounts out of a passion for their work and the communities they serve. This type of influencer engagement builds trust for the institution—in this case, PGCMLS—among the employee’s personal followers.

The Playbook

How to Find Influencers and Make the Connection

Identifying prospective influencers for library and archives collaborations involves casting a wide net and maintaining a continuous awareness of social media trends reaching your communities. Communications and marketing professionals will be accustomed to researching influencers and exploring content circulating among key constituencies. However, their subject matter expertise may be specific to certain social media platforms they are most familiar with. There are two

productive ways to learn about active influencers, and this can be accomplished by anyone who has direct contact with customers or partner organizations.

The first method involves asking colleagues and community members what social media accounts they follow for certain types of content (e.g., event recommendations and local lifestyle content). If you are trying to identify influencers who reach young adults through a public library, talk to your teen services specialists, teens participating in programs, parents/guardians, and educators. If you are part of an academic library, chatting with residence life or athletics staff, or student journalists, would be a great way to learn which students in their orbit influence their classmates' choices about where to be on campus. If you work in a K-12 school library, engage with teachers and parents/guardians to learn what social media platforms have private groups and influencers that engage the broader parent community.

A second approach involves extensive online research. Once you have identified some influential accounts in your community, observe which accounts engage with them by resharing content or tagging local institutions. If you are seeking out book influencers in your area to help promote your literary events, explore the follower lists of local independent bookstores. You will be able to quickly identify some fantastic influencers who speak directly to any number of communities, from readers of romance novels to manga and graphic novels.

If you do not formally work in your library or archives' communications and marketing team, identify the institution's social media manager and talk with them about your ideas relating to trying out engaging influencers. Query if influencer marketing is a part of their current work and if there is an opportunity for you to support influencer engagement. If there is no existing program, start to develop rapport by asking what they observe on the institution's social media accounts. Staff responsible for managing social media accounts can often quickly identify the platform which profiles regularly engage with the library or archives, and which have a strong audience reach.

Expectations/Establishing the Relationship

Once you have identified influencers whose content and posts align well with your institution's values and strategic communications priorities, it is time to connect. While sending a direct message (DM) can be effective for initiating contact without a previous relationship, influencers (like most customers) develop trust and an understanding of your organizational mandate and values over time. Connect with influencers wherever you are comfortable, whether through institutional social media accounts, your personal accounts, or out and about in the community. Your request to collaborate will be received much more favorably if you have established rapport with the influencer on common ground. Libraries and archives are privileged, though, since at least book and local lifestyle influencers are often already followers and amplifiers of their local libraries and archives, given our institutions' prominent role as conveners of the community.

Organizational collaborations with influencers can take many forms. You could engage local artists who have large social media followings (artists who focus on public art projects are often strong in this area) to help promote arts and crafts programs at a public library, which could lead to the influencer presenting a program in collaboration with the library. Inviting influencers to interview authors or moderate panel discussions is always a great way to promote events to the followers of the influencers, who have more incentive to promote the event since they have a substantive role in the programmatic content. Public libraries often support families that homeschool their children, and you better believe there are homeschool parent influencers out there! Inviting them to help promote library resources, programs, and public spaces can be a win-win for everyone.

Compensation and In-Kind Benefits

After several years of working with influencers through my professional roles, I have observed—often through the testimonials of influencers who I trust and count as friends—how essential it is for institutions, whether libraries, bookstores, or publishers, to appropriately recognize the services influencers are being asked to provide in collaborations. Individuals who leverage their social media accounts to casually or professionally create content, whether book reviews or satirical reels on Instagram, maintain a network of existing and prospective library users and supporters who regularly digest their content. This provides a library or archives with an opportunity to directly reach critical communities outside of targeted paid marketing efforts.

This reach has a monetary value, like when a library invests in social media ads or utilizes Google's ad grant program for nonprofits. Influencers have every right to monetize access to their followers, and institutions must be prepared to offer compensation for influencer engagement. If there are budgetary constraints, then the institution must explore options to offer influencers in-kind support like complimentary admission to an event that has a high ticket charge (such as a fundraiser), an opportunity to interview a visiting author for the influencer's own Instagram live or podcast, or library swag that meets a substantial value threshold. Ultimately, the compensation and recognition an influencer requires will depend on the demand for their services, the size of their following, and if they depend primarily on the influencer income for subsistence.

Institutions can quickly fall into a pattern of inappropriate behavior with influencers, expecting them to provide coverage for the "exposure" or to "gain experience." While this may be appealing to emerging influencers seeking to grow their followership, imagine making this ask of a freelance musician who depends on income from their gigs to make ends meet. Influencers, whether they do the work full-time or for fun on the side, should be respected as we do independent contractors who present programs. Failing to appropriately compensate or negotiate in-kind recognition with influencers becomes highly problematic if the institution hopes influencers will help reach communities underserved by the library or archives. If you are trying to improve engagement with the Hispanic and Latin community by promoting library card sign-up month in September, asking a Hispanic or Latin influencer to help you with that for no benefit to them (beyond the public service) could turn into a public relations crisis. Start a conversation with the influencer about your idea, ask what an appropriate form of compensation in exchange for their support would be, and negotiate if necessary. Libraries and archives that collaborate with influencers can easily find any unfair attempts to take advantage of influencers' platforms for no compensation on blast to the very followers they were trying to develop a stronger relationship with.

Conclusion: Centering Influencer Marketing

Whether you are new to community engagement, entering a communications and marketing job in a different type of library, or wholly unfamiliar with influencer marketing, the examples and advice offered can help you start to consider this powerful opportunity for expanding your institution's reach through trusted internal and external voices on social media. As long as social media remains an essential avenue for libraries and archives to reach existing and prospective users where they are, influencer marketing will be an invaluable tool to center in your communications, marketing, and engagement strategies. If your organization has never engaged influencers, start small with a pilot for a single series of events or special initiative. Develop a relationship with one or two influencers with a trusted following that differs from your existing institutional social media following. Invite those influencers to recommend contacts of theirs who might be passionate about helping promote

the work of your library or archives. When you establish a workable proof of concept, take the next step to engage more or different influencers. Always set collaboration goals, analyze the results, and refine for the next round.

Just like ALA's READ posters have held a core identity for almost five decades while evolving to include current celebrities, influencer marketing will continue to grow in libraries and archives. The technical tools of the trade will continually evolve, but the formula for engaging influencers will likely remain the same. Develop relationships with voices who have existing trust among specific communities of customers. Identify meaningful ways to engage those influencers in your work, compensate and recognize those contributions, and consider how your short-term engagement goals can serve long-term engagement goals. There will be a day when the Generation Z influencers will be the more seasoned social media experts, and they will look at the ideas of new colleagues as somewhat different. That is ok. Proactively adapting how libraries and archives communicate based on users' information-seeking behaviors is the best way to cultivate and sustain meaningful long-term relationships with the communities served.

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