When Eyeballs And Dollars Don’t Match Up

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No one can be faulted for thinking that the size of someoneâ€™s Facebook friends list is a proxy for that personâ€™s level of influence.

After all, people who are influential are often also popular, and in a Facebook and Twitter world popularity is measured in friends and followers.

But a new report from Vocus and FutureWorks principal Brian Solis throws a healthy dose of skepticism on the supposed correlation between popularity and influence.

The reportâ€”provocatively titled â€œInfluencer Grudge Match: Lady Gaga versus Bonoâ€•â€”surveyed 739 marketing and communications professionals who work with influencers to gauge their perceptions of what makes an influencer.

A surprising 90% of respondents answered â€œyesâ€• when asked whether thereâ€™s a big difference between popularity and influence.

Nearly the same percentage, 84%, believed that there was a correlation between an influencerâ€™s reach and his or her ability to drive action.

This indicates that respondents made a clear distinction between popularity and reach, and regarded the latter as the key that determines a personâ€™s influence.

The survey did not define any of these terms, so it was up to the respondents to interpret them. From the results, itâ€™s apparent that respondents regarded popularity as the sheer number of contacts on a social network and reach as the ability to actually communicate meaningfully with some number of those contacts.

As one respondent put it, â€œA person can have only a few contacts and greatly influence just those few.â€•

Asked which type of social network participant would have the most measurable effect on an outcome, 57% picked someone who has â€œa handful of fans/friends/followers that are tightly connected,â€• versus 8% who picked someone with â€œmillions of fans/friends/followers with little or no connection.â€• Quality over quantity.

Despite this data, many marketers are on a seemingly relentless quest to beef up their own social network profiles and reach users with lots of friends and followers.

In the Vocus-Solis study, 57% of respondents said theyâ€™d be willing to pay for an influencer to help them â€œdrive actions or outcomes.â€•

Further, Twitter recently unveiled its Promoted Accounts platform, which allows marketers to essentially pay for access to users based on the sizes of those usersâ€™ networks. Quantity over quality.

And an eROI study of social metrics tracked by US marketers found that two-thirds tracked changes in the numbers of friends, followers and fans.

More qualitative measures such as reach of messaging were much lower on the scale. Again, quantity over quality.

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