



5 MARKETING TRENDS TO WATCH IN 2021:

THE AMBASSADOR & CREATOR ERA

INTRODUCTION

2020 will be remembered for a lot of things, but in the digital space, it may be remembered as the year digital and social marketing fully surpassed “traditional” marketing mindshare.

Never before have digital channels been used as our primary connections to friends, family and colleagues — all across the globe. Nor has social media been responsible for so much robust discourse (and discord) — antitrust, politics, ad bans, censorship, and public service — as the world watched pivotal elections, civil rights, Brexit and a global pandemic play out simultaneously. Social media has jumped two years into the future to become fully realized as the central, short-form creative storytelling and entertainment medium linking consumers, brands and technology.

As we embark on the new year in a changed market landscape, it's also clear that social media has become more critical to business and brand marketing success everywhere. A deeper focus among brands on authenticity through ambassadors and other advocates is driving that prosperity. This is embraced by both savvy social content creators and consumers who have accepted the communication power that was once wholly owned by media companies, governments and big brands. These digital change agents are done with the old world way of doing things in a new world order.

We've uncovered five key trends that will shape digital and social marketing this year and for years to come as we continue to see profound and permanent shifts in communication behavior. We've identified specific actions every marketer can take to adapt to these changes, with examples from leading organizations that have already seen success with using their most valuable advocate voices.

CONSUMERS NOW RELY ON SOCIAL DAILY AND WANT MORE FROM THEIR EXPERIENCES

Digital and social media use rates that were already outpacing other forms of media snowballed even further with the global market avalanche that was 2020.

Over 3.2 billion people are [social network users](#) now, about 150 million more than were projected at the start of last year. [Instagram's growth in Western Europe alone was expected to be three times what it was](#) before the pandemic hit. And a Morning Consult study found that nearly 25% of respondents [expected to use social media more](#) after the crisis.

These users, stuck in an increasingly disconnected world, have come to rely on social media as their lifeline to other people and up-to-the-second dispatches. [They're spending more time on social media](#) channels than ever before, an average of 82 minutes per day just in the U.S. More of them are getting their news there. And they're posting more content as well. Social media has become the collective information hub to transact daily life.

Platforms and brands are luring consumers with engaging longer-form video and live streaming, innovative creators, and niche communities that speak to individual

interests honed in a time of isolation and unrest.

Yet audiences are also getting savvier about the social media giants and more determined to understand how they impact communication and interaction with others. They're sharpening their media literacy skills, which were rigorously tested in 2020, and responding to social impact stories that affect the world around them. They're getting more selective about what information they consume and share with their followers. And they're demanding increased levels of accountability and transparency in how social media companies interact with them — how they serve ad messages, collect information and harness their activity.



This deeper social media reliance and critical thinking, along with shifting use among various demographics, are cementing preferences consumers have for specific social platforms. Within the top social networks, Instagram and TikTok are increasingly the platforms where they're

flocking. They may have accounts on one social platform only or, more likely, they have accounts across multiple social channels, with curated content, personas, networks and experiences on each — making it harder for marketing teams to reach and engage them.

Action

CREATE CONTENT FOR WHO YOUR CONSUMERS ARE AND WHERE THEY SPEND TIME

Armed with this knowledge of how consumers are devouring social media now, marketers in this era are going all in on social but more strategically creating for the audiences they have on each platform and the environments and features specific to those channels.

A sports team may find that real-time game clips perform well with their fans on Twitter, but training camp highlights resonate more with fans viewing Instagram Stories or Facebook. An audience for one network television show may gravitate toward the Instagram feed for behind-the-scenes shots, and Instagram Stories and Reels for cast Q&As and promos. Another show, team or brand's fan base may be all over TikTok or YouTube Shorts for similar content.

In each case, marketing teams are building reach and forming deep consumer connections through engaging content tailored to the platform. And to help create

and amplify that media, they're turning to their favored brand advocates: the athletes or talent endorsing the organization, and its passionate employees and ambassadors.



Social is the bulk of our marketing plans these days, and we're taking a talent-facing approach there. Going forward, social will be more important than it has been before. Brands are showing other brands that don't believe in social so much the power of it.

– Crystal Johnson

Director of Social Media, BET+

<https://www.greenfly.com/in-the-news/bet-talent-greenfly-svod/>

Customers we work with at [Greenfly](#) often make specific advocate requests for content creation and sharing based on the particular social platform. For example, one sports club asks its athletes to record snappy :15 TikTok videos in irreverent scenes to cater to the platform's entertainment-oriented environment and reach its younger fans there. At the same time, the club's social team collaborates with the same athletes to share match highlight videos, apparel launch photos and sponsor-branded teasers with its broader fanbase on Twitter.

And broadcast networks regularly tap into their on-air talent to promote anchor programming events on Twitter, where those personalities' followers tend to gather.



This activity helps the channels stand out creatively from competitive programming offerings and provides social proof to drive viewership, such as for a multi-part series that was among the highest viewed events last year.

This bespoke content approach to social platforms and audiences is becoming more critical as authentic advocate media outstrips brand-produced media in consumers' hearts and minds.



Trend #2

RAW, AUTHENTIC SOCIAL CONTENT BEATS STUDIO-PRODUCED OPTIONS

While social has become the center of brand marketing, it's organic social content that's reverberating outward. Advertising on every channel, even social, is losing its influence. People see through ad messages more these days and continue to gravitate towards real content that speaks to them and with them, not at them.

Time and again, marketers have learned the lesson that authenticity in media always wins. Consumers simply want straight talk from people they trust can give an honest endorsement of a brand: [their favorite advocates](#). They live the brand every day, so they're in the best position to convey genuine love and loyalty for it — particularly in an era when public trust in brand

messages has been diminished. And they have much larger followings collectively that brands can't match.

When these revered evangelists and ambassadors create and share authentic brand content, providing their inner-circle perspective and implied endorsement, they collectively form a human bond with audiences that's hard to replicate. In fact, 86% of people say [authenticity is an important factor when determining what brands they will like and support](#), particularly younger generations. And this desire for realness has led to a growing preference for content over advertising and for non-polished social content that isn't produced in a studio and served up to them in a slick, airbrushed package.



At times, athlete-led content completely outperforms anything we have planned and worked hard on creating. We could shoot what we feel is an insightful long-form feature about training that bombs, we then receive a 20-second video of Steve Smith playing the guitar or Ben Stokes playing Call of Duty which is our best performing post of the week.

– Stuart Cope

Head of Digital, Rajasthan Royals

<https://engage.hashtagsports.com/2020/12/14/rajasthan-royals-digital-team-ipl-content-during-covid-pandemic/>



This shift has had fortuitous timing: Professional advertising and content production is not fully up to speed from the events of 2020 and will continue to lag throughout this year. And this media will be even more expensive, time-consuming and challenging to produce with pandemic protocols and regulations. Many of these guidelines will also become part of standard production operations. With the additional issues of slashed marketing budgets and fewer places to advertise beyond digital channels, marketers have realized they need an efficient alternative to glossy brand messages.

Action

DETERMINE WHAT MAKES YOUR BRAND AUTHENTIC AND DOUBLE DOWN

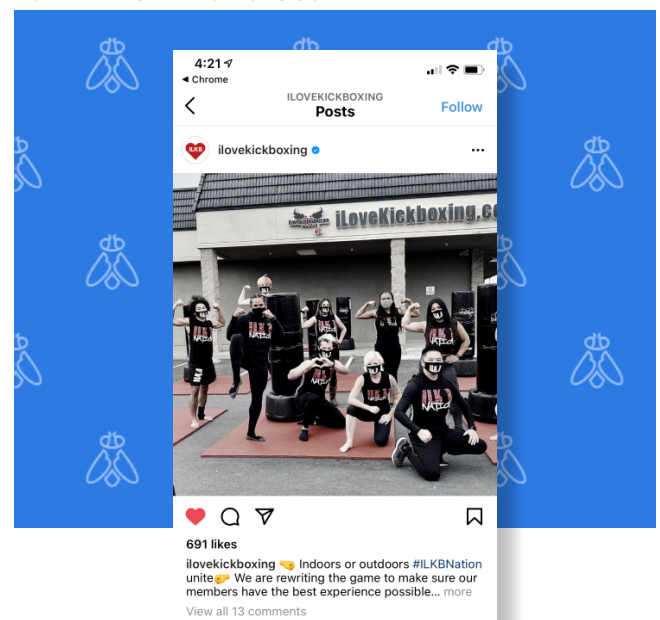
Organizations we work with at Greenfly are prioritizing authentic media from their advocates to connect more genuinely with their audiences, reduce production costs and logistical challenges, and get better results from their social content.

These goals and advocate groups cut across industries. The Biden for President campaign team found in their internal tests that traditional political ads — professionally produced, slick-looking 30-second spots — were far less effective than impromptu, behind-the-scenes footage and ads that featured regular voters talking directly into their smartphones or webcams about

why they were voting for him. And the Democratic National Committee turned to their surrogates to [get the word out on social and digital channels](#) about their 2020 election voter guides featuring former U.S. President and “voting enthusiast” Barack Obama.

Authentic content can come together quickly and also differentiate brands looking to stand out in a crowded marketplace and around the world. For example, the social team at fitness franchise I Love Kickboxing has been able to [refresh and differentiate their brand](#) and respond to fast-changing local market COVID-19 conditions by collecting content updates recorded by over 100 of their local studio managers across North America. And SailGP is able to tap into sailing team athletes around the world to share content captured from body cameras during competitions with fans.

Image Source: @ilovekickboxing. Instagram. November 16, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CHp_ogcgzjx/



It's time to think beyond old marketing paradigms. Original advocate-generated media will beat expensive, glossy content going forward. And the definition of advocates is expanding beyond endorsers to include end consumers, as we'll see next.

Trend #3

FANS AREN'T JUST ON THE SIDELINES – THEY'RE A PART OF YOUR CREATIVE TEAM

With access to most live events cut off, 2020 propelled more consumers to participate remotely in the brand experiences and content they enjoy.



Fan communities were able to shift quickly from meeting in physical event spaces to gathering solely on digital and social ones. And what used to be user-generated content that may or may not have been orchestrated by a brand is fully evolving into their purpose-created solicitations for content generated by fans. These directed

campaigns promise to change how people interact with their favorite sports teams, shows and products — and each other — moving forward.

Production studios in the form of mobile phones are in the palm or pocket of nearly every consumer today, so savvy marketers are proactively engaging their fans to collaborate and co-create content with them on those devices. Who wouldn't be more tied to a brand's content and willing to promote it than those who've had a hand in making it?

Marketing teams are now soliciting superfan creators to submit their special brand-oriented moments and providing them with licensed media like images, sounds and social filters to build upon, edit and make cooler for social media and other brand channels.

In this way, brands are turning their biggest supporters into their most ardent, authentic advocates and ambassadors. This has helped organizations accelerate their focus around engaging people really intimately and powerfully on social platforms. And these platforms, including Instagram and TikTok, continue to add feature enhancements and technology integrations to support such collective creativity.





Action

LET YOUR FANS CREATE FOR YOUR BRAND

Marketing departments everywhere are embracing consumer creators in big ways to extend their brands across channels through the voices of their most passionate audiences.

Like traditional brand advocates, fans can provide an organization with the authenticity they're looking for in these times but with an added layer of credibility as satisfied customers. Their emotional reactions, personal stories, thank-yous, and more are often the best inspiration for others to jump on your brand bandwagon.

In the midst of the pandemic, with no ticker-tape parade in sight, the Los Angeles Dodgers' MLB World Series championship called for a virtual celebration. The club's digital team rallied over 3,500 fans to submit their championship moment reaction videos through Greenfly, which they compiled into a social media video montage. This campaign allowed the team to remotely capture all the energy of those celebratory fan responses and include their most fervent advocates in the win. And for the lucky fans who made the final video, it gave them content to proudly shout out to their networks, too.



It gives us an opportunity to acknowledge and thank and celebrate our fans and gives all of us a chance to relive that amazing moment that was the last out.

– Caroline Morgan

Vice President of Digital Strategy,
Los Angeles Dodgers

<https://www.latimes.com/sports/dodgers/story/2020-11-03/dodgers-celebration-video>

Based on their success with player content sharing on social, another one of our sports team customers has activated fans to create content through its 100+ fan clubs around the world. A fan coordinator within each club works with a select group of fans to request content from them. The team's community management staff then takes the best fan-generated content to feed the club's social channels.

Additionally, a professional sports team requested videos from fans and mashed them together with archived footage into new videos celebrating special moments in the franchise's history. And fan engagement can include other communities surrounding an organization. Nonprofit Giving Tuesday used this same technology and techniques to [share a compilation of messages from program recipients and donors around the world.](#)

Building fan engagement through social content those same fans create will be a linchpin of digital marketing plans going



forward. And the value of those deeply connected communities is also starting to translate into more lucrative partnerships for brands around the globe.

Trend #4

SOCIAL MEDIA IS THE NEW ARENA TO GROW PARTNER VALUE

Organizations in all industries have recognized they can no longer rely on their traditional brand and media channels to build value with sponsors and media partners.

With the global shuttering of most live events last year and the aforementioned rise in digital channel influence across borders, [social has now become a lifeline to demonstrating partner ROI](#) and helping to fill in revenue gaps. In fact, social media has been among the most used marketing channels to activate sponsorships in recent years, and there are no signs that it's slowing down.

Partners are increasingly demanding more proof of a return on their investments and more visibility into how their business is being helped by social media. There are a number of ways through which organizations are highlighting their value these days, such as measurable social campaigns that drive new sales leads and direct sales, expand awareness, and promote new products, while

still ensuring meaningful fan connections and delivering content and experiences they enjoy.

To accomplish these goals for sponsors, many brand marketing teams are activating their advocates, fans and the partners themselves to create compelling social content, building more awareness and engagement within their shared ecosystems.

Action

THINK BEYOND YOUR STANDARD TOOLKIT TO CONNECT YOUR PARTNERS TO AUDIENCES

It's clear that sponsor marketing needs to evolve, and the best way for marketing teams to do that these days is to leverage advocates to tell a brand's story on social media.

One of our global sports team customers is building upon their success with both player and fan-generated content by deepening sponsor and media relationships. Granular social analytics lets them demonstrate the brand's reach and engagement with fans, which helps them secure more sponsorship support.

As noted during a recent [Sports Business Journal panel](#), Major League Baseball's five-part original series, *On First With Pete Alonso*, presented by Gatorade, [connected the sports beverage brand to baseball fans in an organic way](#) on the league's YouTube



channel. The video series highlighted the New York Mets first baseman's humor and real-time reactions and let his personality shine through to his fans as he was mic'd up during several games throughout the 2020 season.

And sponsor value can extend even further across platforms to drive meaningful social change. The Rajasthan Royals cricket team develops partnerships that both fit their brand and offer an opportunity to make a social impact. The team launched a campaign with NIINE sanitary napkins in India, where there is a real stigma attached to periods. For every run scored in the recent Indian Premier League tournament, NIINE offered nine girls sanitary napkin support for three months. Royals team players were quizzed about their thoughts on periods and how they have affected their lives and those of their partners, wives and family members. The video resulting from those conversations was shared on the Royals' social channels, including YouTube.

Image Source: Rajasthan Royals. YouTube, October 31, 2020.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsuzN8V43Sk&feature=youtu.be>



There will undoubtedly be more opportunities to leverage advocates and ambassadors for solidifying partnerships, as social platforms and technology solutions advance their offerings and continue their bounding march into the future together.

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We want to grow a valuable audience. We want to be the pinnacle of the sport, so we want to nail that sailing fanbase, but then really that's not where we stop. That's really just the beginning for us. And we branch out and really make this a mass participation, fan-centric proposition, which sponsors and partners are going to be interested in.

– Tim Godfrey

Chief Marketing Officer, SailGP

<https://www.sportsloft.co/podcast/episode/a35f3ded/athletes-as-content-creators>

Trend #5

SOCIAL PLATFORMS WILL CONTINUE TO CHANGE TO OUTDO EACH OTHER

Social platforms will continue to pivot their content offerings, prioritize content from individuals and introduce new products this year, as the market shifts and feature sets continue to be replicated by existing competitors and upstarts.



Longer video stories, live shopping, and audio-only rooms are a taste of what's to come as these companies strive to drill down more deeply into individual behaviors and preferences and provide more engaging information and entertainment meccas. Platforms will add more social and digital-first live events, messaging capabilities, interactive elements, and gaming to capture the real-time conversations and authenticity that fit each channel and user community.

New regulations for many of the large tech platforms are also on the horizon in the coming months and years, the byproduct of rapid growth moves as well as the rhythm of competitive market forces. These promise to alter how marketing partners and consumers interact with them.

Marketers looking to get ahead in the social and digital space are learning to put strategies and technology solutions in place that allow them to remain efficient while adapting to these ongoing platform changes that can impact their brand reach and engagement. And they're educating their ambassadors and creators on these trends and tools to continue their valuable content streams and collaboration.

Amidst this activity, [technology tools to create and distribute social content](#), personalize it, and manage advocates and other creators are also getting more sophisticated and integrated with the social media giants.

Action

GO WITH THE (CONTENT) FLOW, BUT BE SMART ABOUT IT

It's a given that social outlets and technology will continue to proliferate, and there's little that brands can do to affect those shifts. The age-old advice for remaining flexible in a dynamic market is as true as it has ever been. But there are ways brands are positioning themselves strategically, ready to take full advantage of what the marketplace may bring.

For starters, marketers are embracing extensible tools and content strategies that can grow and morph as their brands and advocate groups do. And they're seeking tech partners who can integrate seamlessly within their existing tech stack for capturing, organizing, delivering and measuring social content.



A recent [Hashtag Sports panel](#) highlighted that the NBA's digital team felt "unintentionally, incredibly well-prepared" to create content during a pandemic. This



was due to their having the right technology partner tools in place to continue collaborating, creating and clipping content at the speed, quality and volume they did before the pandemic, so that engagement levels didn't drop.

And the National Lacrosse League (NLL) uses the Grabyo and Greenfly +Connect integration to automate video content clipping and delivery to players. During the league's [virtual live draft](#) in 2020, the NLL sent personalized galleries of draftee selection moment videos and clips to players for immediate posting to their social media profiles, as the draft was still in progress. The collaboration resulted in reach and engagement that surpassed the league's previous in-person draft events – by 65 percent – while increasing viewership across B/R Live and the NLL's YouTube and Facebook channels.

Social content experiences will inevitably change as consumer behaviors continue to do. Marketers who think astutely about how technology and their advocates can help them adapt will be positioned to lead across all of these trends this year and build solid consumer bonds for the future.



As a small team—we have three people on our social team who oversee and create daily content—we need to be extremely efficient. Leveraging technology to manage our content output is imperative because otherwise, we would not be able to achieve the scale that we've been able to deliver, which is roughly 12 to 15 pieces per day on Facebook, an additional 5 to 6 on Instagram, and we're now programming new platforms like TikTok.

From a fan interaction perspective, social is also a great place for us to build community, in addition to achieving scale and reach, we're using social as a tool to drive engagement.

– Tim Greenberg

EVP of Production and Branded Content,
World Surf League

<https://engage.hashtagsports.com/2019/12/10/wsl-content-social/>



FINAL THOUGHTS

To jump on these five trends and stay ahead in this era of ambassadors and creators, let's recap our 2021 marketing action plan:

1. **It's time to go all in. Create content strategically for your audiences.**
2. **Authentic media will prevail. Save money on branded content production and get better results.**
3. **UGC is old! Don't scrape; use purpose-built content from fans.**
4. **Sponsor marketing has evolved. Leverage your advocates to tell the story.**
5. **Social platforms and technology will proliferate. Embrace extensible tools and content strategies.**

Follow these strategies, and your brand will remain solidly connected to your consumers and positioned for success as even more change is sure to come.

DISCOVER GREENFLY

Greenfly's brand advocacy platform is helping brands expand their remote collaboration and communication capabilities, helping entire teams connect and share short-form media.

Sports leagues, media and entertainment companies, and consumer brands depend on Greenfly to both share media galleries as well as collect original photos and videos from their advocates. This authentic content helps both the advocate and the organization build deeper, more personal connections with followers on social media. Greenfly has helped transform their advocates into brand builders by harnessing the power of authentic content.

If you're looking to enhance your marketing efforts this year, let us know. We can activate your ambassadors and other advocates to create buzz, build trust through personal endorsement, expand your social reach, and create deeper consumer connections.



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