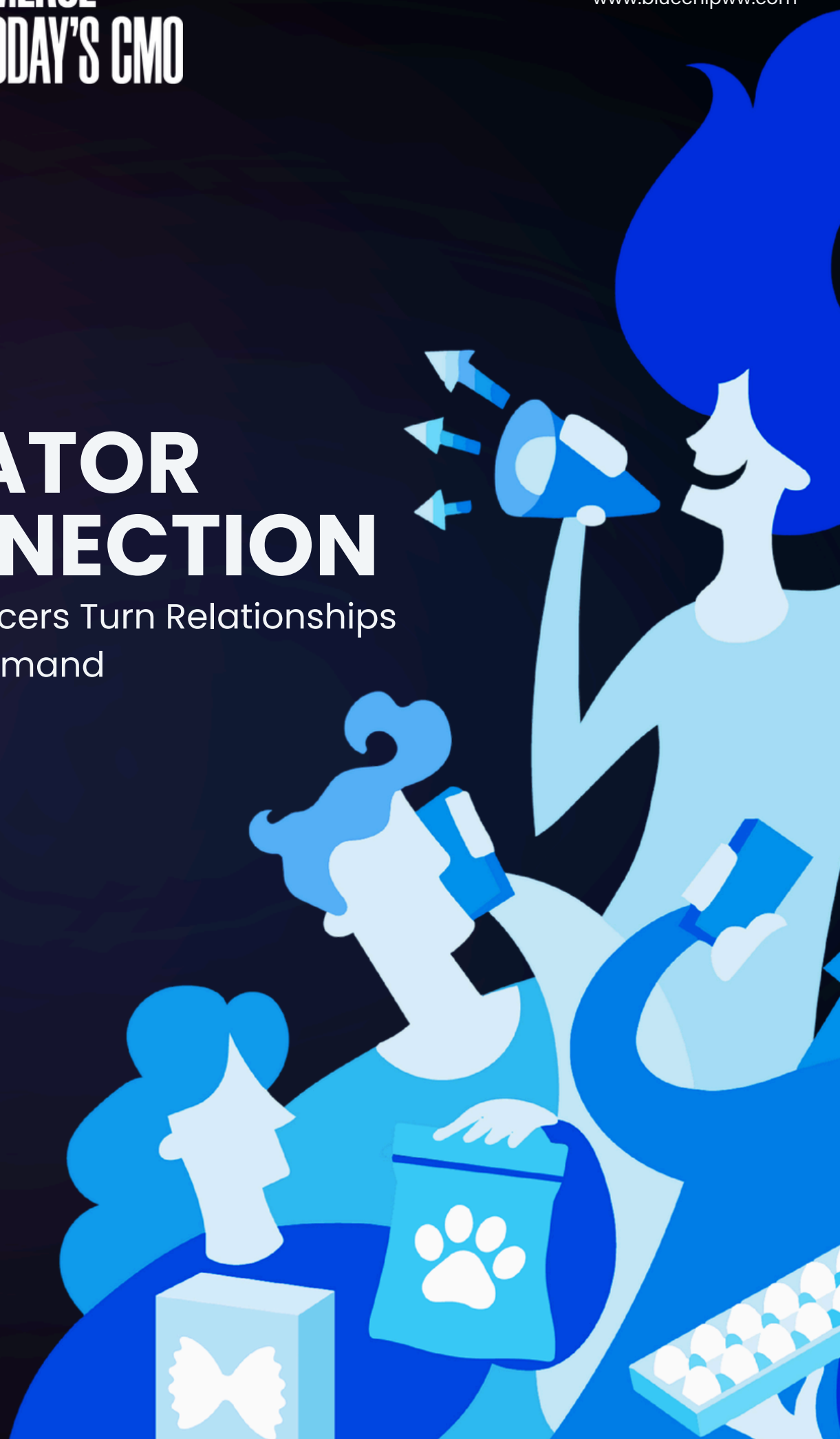
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THE CREATOR CONNECTION

How Influencers Turn Relationships Into CPG Demand



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

01. The Feed Is a Social Environment

02. Closeness Is Built Through Recognition and Continuity

03. Connection Changes the Purchase Equation

04. Newness Creates Curiosity; Continuity Earns Permission

05. The Community Is Part of the Endorsement

06. Consumers Accept Sponsorship - but Reject the Wrong Story

07. Borrowed Trust Is Borrowed Risk

08. The Creator Commerce Scorecard

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01 | THE FEED IS A SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The Category Error

Influencer marketing has evolved into a powerful channel for brands, but much of the way we approach talent is still surprisingly transactional. We identify creators based on audience fit, buy into their reach, evaluate engagement and connect performance back to sales. Those things matter—but they don't go deep enough. We're often selecting influencers based on who their audience is, without fully understanding the relationship they have with that audience. And increasingly, that relationship may be the most valuable thing a brand is buying into.

Creator content does not enter the feed the same way a display ad or programmatic placement does. It is not dropped into a cold digital environment and asked to create relevance from scratch. Followers of creators may have watched the same person for months or years, learned their recurring language, tracked their routines, witnessed ordinary and vulnerable moments and participated in a community around them. When a brand appears, it enters a relationship already in progress.

That is the core of parasocial connection: a sense of familiarity and social closeness with a media figure who does not know the individual follower in the same way. Horton and Wohl first described this apparent intimacy "at a distance" in 1956. Later research distinguishes the momentary feeling of interaction from the longer-term relationship that accumulates over time via repeated exposure. In this report, "parasocial connection" is the practical umbrella term for both. [1, 2]

Platforms like TikTok and Instagram, and especially the rise of livestreaming, have given parasocial relationships new depth. As social content has evolved away from highly polished, scripted posts toward content that feels more spontaneous, unfiltered and authentic, audiences are getting a more personal window into creators' lives. They're seeing everyday routines, hearing candid opinions, watching imperfect moments and interacting in real time. And as this more natural style of content has resonated on these platforms, it has helped shift the relationship from simply watching a creator to feeling like you actually know them.

That sense of familiarity and personal connection is what gives parasocial relationships, and ultimately creator influence, so much power.

Brands are not buying access to an audience. They are entering a relationship that already has a history.

What Our Survey Found

Among 300 creator-engaged CPG consumers, 90% said they often or sometimes feel personally connected to creators they follow. Eighty-seven percent agreed that following creators over time increases trust in them. Eighty-one percent agreed that trying or buying a product can feel like participating in a creator's world.

This does not mean that closeness guarantees a sale. But it does suggest that closeness changes the meaning of the message and raises both its potential value and its potential risk.

The Takeaway

Treat creator marketing as relationship entry, not rented reach. The brand arrives inside a social system of familiarity, narrative and community that existed before the sponsorship. **The goal shouldn't be to insert a brand message into a creator's reach. It should be to find the creators whose existing relationships give that message genuine meaning.**

1. P 1956
2. JOC 2020

02 | CLOSENESS IS BUILT THROUGH RECOGNITION AND CONTINUITY

What Actually Creates the Bond

"Authenticity" has become one of the most overused terms in creator marketing. It still matters, but authenticity itself isn't the strategy. The real opportunity is understanding what creates it: the repeated interactions, shared narratives, familiarity and trust that a creator builds with their audience over time.

Our survey points to more specific behaviors that help creators build connection with followers. When asked what makes them feel more connected to a creator or influencer, respondents most often selected:

- Responding to comments/questions: 54%
- Talking like friends/community: 52% (correct)
- Showing real/imperfect moments: 51%
- Routines/behind-the-scenes: 43%
- Asking followers to choose/decide: 38%
- Familiar greetings/sayings/recurring formats: 39%
- Funny/not too serious: 27%

These behaviors work together. Replies create recognition. Repeated content routines create continuity. Ordinary moments reduce social distance. Polls and questions give followers a role. None of these behaviors require a creator to pretend every follower is a real-life friend. Instead, they create a feeling of closeness: the sense of being included, recognized and understood.

The strongest creators make followers feel recognized.

Relationship Mechanics Beat Surface Polish

Academic research points in the same direction. A meta-analysis of 120 parasocial studies found that people feel stronger bonds with creators when they perceive similarity, identify with the person they follow and become involved in the person's story. Those bonds can make a creator's recommendations feel less like ads and more like advice from a familiar source. [1]

A 2025 meta-analysis of influencer marketing supports similar conclusions: the creator-follower relationship helps drive attitudes and engagement; useful or entertaining content helps move people closer to purchase. [2]

Recent live-commerce research reinforces the point: likability alone is not what builds connection. Followers were more drawn in when they felt involved in the creator's story and present in the creator's world. [3]

- The strongest creators don't simply come across as likable.
- They make followers feel recognized, included and invested in the world they have built.

The Takeaway

Choose creators for **how they build connection**, not just how many people they reach. Look for signs of an established relationship: follower recognition, recurring rituals and routines, an ongoing narrative, active dialogue and a community that participates rather than simply watches.

1. JOC 2020
2. JAMS 2024
3. FC 2026

03 | CONNECTION CHANGES THE PURCHASE EQUATION

The clearest pattern in the survey is that connection does more than increase affection for a creator. It makes consumers more likely to engage with sponsored content, consider the product and purchase it.

A Relationship Can Become a Commercial Multiplier

Among consumers who said they often feel personally connected to creators, 54% said creator content had led them to purchase a product.

Connected followers were also more open to sponsored creator content:

- **They engage to support the creator.** 86% of connected followers had engaged with sponsored content because they wanted to support the creator, compared with 34% of unconnected followers.
- **They pay attention to the community response.** 70% said comments or community reactions affect how they view a creator's product recommendation "a lot," compared with 15% of unconnected followers.
- **They are more interested when the brand fits.** 74% said they are usually interested in sponsored content when the brand fits the creator, compared with 16% of unconnected followers.

Participation Is Part of the Value Exchange

Across the full sample, 81% agreed that buying or trying a product can feel like participating in a creator's world, and 65% had engaged with sponsored product content to support the creator. This suggests creator commerce is not only about product persuasion. For some consumers, engagement and purchase also function as participation, support and affiliation. Product value still matters. Need, relevance and ease of purchase remain essential. But connection changes how those benefits are received: a recommendation can feel less like an ad and more like advice from a familiar source.

54%*

said creator content led them to purchase a product

*of consumers who feel personally connected to creators

The Takeaway

The most powerful creator commerce doesn't just convert attention into purchase. It converts connection into participation. A product still has to earn the sale, but when audiences are invested in a creator, the transaction can carry additional meaning: a way to participate, show support and reinforce their connection to the creator's world.

04 | NEWNESS CREATES CURIOSITY; CONTINUITY EARNS PERMISSION

Newness Opens the Curiosity Gap

Newness is powerful because it gives followers a reason to pay attention. In our survey, 79% said they become more interested when a creator says they just discovered a product. The appeal is the sense that the creator has found something worth passing along before it is widely known.

That response is consistent with curiosity research, which shows that people are motivated by gaps between what they know and what they want to know. [1] A "just discovered" product can open that gap by making the recommendation feel timely, surprising or insider-like. For CPG brands, this can be especially useful for launches, reformulations and products that benefit from demonstration. [2]

Continuity Makes the Recommendation Believable

But curiosity is not the same as credibility. When respondents were forced to choose between two creator recommendations, 76% preferred the creator who said the product had been part of their routine for a long time. Only 24% chose the creator who had "just discovered" it.

The ranking exercise points to the same tension. Discovery had real appeal, with roughly one in five ranking it first. But it was also more polarizing, with more than one in four ranking it last. In contrast, long-term use gives followers a reason to believe the product truly belongs in the creator's life.

76%

of consumers preferred the creator who said the product had been part of their routine for a long time

In an experiment we conducted as part of this research, these ideas of newness and continuity were reinforced. Respondents were randomly shown one of two sponsored posts that featured a cleaning product: one post framed the product as something the creator had just discovered, while the other framed it as part of her established cleaning routine. Purchase intent was equally strong in both conditions at 77%, suggesting both approaches can work. That said, the continuity version produced directionally stronger reactions on measures such as trust, comment intent and overall positive response.

The implication is not that one approach is better than the other. In fact, newness and continuity should be viewed as complementary strategies. Each persuades in a different way. "Just discovered" gives people a reason to look. Long-term use gives them a reason to believe, because the product appears to have a real place in the creator's life.

The Takeaway

Don't manufacture the product story. Cast for it. If you want discovery, find creators who are genuinely experiencing the product for the first time. If you want continuity, find creators who already know, use and believe in it. **The most believable creator marketing starts with a true product relationship, not a scripted one.**

1. PB 1994
2. IJR 2025

05 | THE COMMUNITY IS PART OF THE ENDORSEMENT

The Audience Does Not Disappear When the Ad Begins

Ninety-three percent said comments or community reactions affect how they view a creator recommendation. Eighty-one percent said they are more likely to consider a product when other followers are engaging with it.

In other words, the post is not the whole message. The surrounding conversation also shapes how the recommendation is judged. Followers use comments to confirm use, ask practical questions, compare experiences, challenge claims and decide whether the brand feels like a natural fit. How the creator responds — or fails to respond — becomes part of the evidence.

Social Proof Becomes Social Participation

Research points to the same conclusion: the audience around a creator can shape how a recommendation is received. Comments can reinforce trust, raise doubts or change the way people interpret the endorsement. That means the community is not just reacting to the ad after the fact; it is part of how the ad works. [1]

What Brands Should Do

Brands cannot control the comment thread, but they can prepare for it. The goal is not to script the community; it is to give creators the guidance, guardrails and follow-up plan they need once the conversation starts.

- Plan community management before the post goes live, not after comments appear.
- Equip creators to answer product questions in their own voice, within clear claim boundaries.
- Track the substance, sentiment and direction of comments, not only the count.
- Use recurring follower questions to shape follow-up content and retail detail pages.
- Never manufacture or suppress community response in ways that create deceptive social proof.

93%

of consumers said comments affect how they view a creator recommendation

The Takeaway

The community is not background noise. It can validate the recommendation, surface objections, and turn a brand moment into a shared social event - or expose a mismatch in public.

| 1. JMM 2020

06 | CONSUMERS ACCEPT SPONSORSHIP — BUT REJECT THE WRONG STORY

Sponsorship Is Not Automatically a Trust Breaker

Consumers do not appear to reject sponsored creator content simply because it is paid. In our survey, 51% said they are usually interested in sponsored content when the brand fits the creator, and another 37% said they do not mind sponsorship but judge it based on the product. Only 10% said they usually skip sponsored content, and just 2% said sponsorship automatically makes them trust the creator less.

That should shift how brands think about the "ad problem." The issue is not that consumers are incapable of accepting a paid recommendation. The issue is whether the partnership makes sense, whether the product experience feels truthful and whether the creator can talk about it in a way that fits the relationship they have already built.

51%

of consumers are interested in sponsored content when the brand fits the creator

Social Proof Becomes Social Participation

The strongest believability cues were not about making the sponsorship invisible. They were about helping the recommendation feel grounded in real use. When asked which factors make a creator feel most believable when featuring a product, respondents most often selected:

- Mentioning both positives and negatives: 48%.
- Explaining why the creator likes or uses the product: 45%.
- Showing the product in a real routine or situation: 41%.
- Showing that the product fits the creator's usual content: 40%.
- Showing that the creator already uses similar products: 36%.

Disclosure still matters, but it plays a different role. FTC guidance requires clear and conspicuous disclosure of material connections, honest descriptions of actual experience and support for objective product claims. [1] In other words, disclosure protects trust, but it does not create belief by itself.

The real risk is not the sponsorship itself. It is a partnership that feels forced: a product that does not fit, a claim the creator cannot credibly make or a script that sounds unlike the person followers chose to follow.

The Takeaway

Don't hide the ad. Make the partnership make sense. Transparency and persuasion aren't at odds. Clearly disclose the relationship, then earn credibility through the right creator, a believable product story and content that feels natural in their world.

| 1. FTC

07 | BORROWED TRUST IS BORROWED RISK

A Strong Bond Raises Expectations

Forty-eight percent of respondents said they had thought less of a brand because of the creator or influencer it partnered with. Among consumers with high parasocial-connection, that figure rose to 57%, compared with 43% among the low-connection group.

That difference is not proof that closeness causes backlash. It is a warning that the same relationship that can transfer credibility also creates standards. Highly invested followers know what is "in character," notice contradictions and can interpret a mismatched partnership as a violation of the community's norms.

The stronger the relationship, the more valuable the transfer - and the more visible the violation.

Consumers know when they are being sold to, and they judge whether the partnership feels honest, relevant and believable.

Where Brands Get Hurt

Brands cannot control the comment thread, but they can prepare for it. The goal is not to script the community; it is to give creators the guidance, guardrails and follow-up plan they need once the conversation starts.

- **Creator-brand mismatch:** The category, values or product use does not fit the creator's established world.
- **Claim overreach:** The content promises more than the creator can honestly say or the brand can substantiate.
- **Inauthentic claims:** The creator implies long-term use, a spontaneous discovery or personal enthusiasm that is not true.
- **Sponsor saturation:** Repeated "new favorites" make every recommendation less believable.
- **Behavioral or reputational risk:** The creator's conduct changes how followers interpret the sponsoring brand.
- **Over-control:** Brand scripting removes the creator's voice and makes the post feel inserted rather than lived.

The Takeaway

Parasocial connection amplifies both trust and accountability. The stronger the creator-audience bond, the more credibility a brand can inherit—but also the more scrutiny it can face when a partnership feels forced, inconsistent or out of character. **The answer isn't more control. It's better choices:** choose creators whose relationships and worlds naturally fit the brand, establish clear guardrails and protect the voice and connection that made them influential in the first place.

08 | THE CREATOR COMMERCE SCORECARD

Follower count cannot tell a CPG brand whether a creator relationship is strong enough, relevant enough or safe enough to carry the brand. The scorecard below turns the research into six practical dimensions.

1. Parasocial strength

What to look for: Evidence of familiarity, follower investment, recurring references and trust built over time.

Red flags: High reach with shallow or purely transactional engagement.

2. Narrative fit

What to look for: A recurring routine, problem, format or life context in which the product can appear naturally.

Red flags: The brand requires a one-off detour from what the creator normally does.

3. Discovery value

What to look for: Ability to introduce something new with credible curiosity, surprise and useful explanation.

Red flags: Scripted "I just found this" language, exaggerated novelty or no real product learning.

4. Proof and category credibility

What to look for: Actual use, balanced evaluation, category experience, demonstration and claims that can be supported.

Red flags: Generic praise, no usage evidence, unfamiliarity with the product or unsupported claims.

5. Community participation

What to look for: Substantive comments, creator replies, follower-to-follower discussion and productive questions.

Red flags: Mostly passive metrics, low-quality engagement or hostile community-brand mismatch.

6. Commercial integrity and risk

What to look for: Clear disclosures, manageable sponsor load, aligned values, conflict checks and crisis readiness.

Red flags: Hidden relationships, sponsor saturation, category conflicts or unstable brand-safety history.

Scoring approach: rate each dimension from 1-5, then set minimum thresholds for category credibility, commercial integrity and risk. A high total score should never compensate for a red-line failure on disclosure, truthful experience, claims or brand safety.

The scorecard is not a substitute for judgment. It forces the right questions before reach, price or platform convenience drive the decision.

Want to Strengthen Your Creator Strategy?

Let Blue Chip perform a free audit where we'll evaluate the relationships behind your next partnerships before they go live.

About Blue Chip

We're an independent, full-service Brand Commerce™ agency. We bring change for our clients by uniting brand building and sales performance. We build brands over time and sales overnight.

About the Report

In September 2026, Blue Chip conducted quantitative research with 300 U.S. creator-engaged CPG consumers to understand how parasocial connection, social presence, community and content context influence attention, trust, purchase behavior and brand risk.

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