

People with a large following on social networks are being wooed by brands for the influence they hold in the online world. Is this reducing the authenticity of online conversations? R Krishna reports

Bangalore-based Hrish Thota was recently given the Tata Indica Vista to drive even before it hit the market. Is Thota an expert in cars? No. Is he a movie celebrity that the company hopes to sign on? No. Thota is a social media 'influencer' who was signed on because of his following on Twitter (@dhempe), the responses his tweets generate and the popularity of his blog.

MOVE OVER CELEBS

If traditional advertising depended on celebrities to push goods, the growing clout of ordinary people in social media has forced companies to tap these influencers. Tata Nano, Sunilk, Smirnoff and L'Oreal are some brands that have a social media strategy in place. The brands start conversations with people active online, especially with those who have a large number of followers and who can, in theory, swing opinion. The 'influencers' are wooed with invitations to special events, freebies and even money in return for tweets, Facebook updates or blog posts that create a buzz around the brand. An 'influencer's' endorsement is perceived as more authentic than advertising. But is it really? Though influencers have been around for

TWEETS, LIKES OR DHOKHA?

some time, the jury is out on whether they are influential. Some brands swear by them, "Between 8-10% of website traffic comes from our influencers who share information about products that they purchase or like on our website," says Piyush Bhargav of online shopping store Homeshop18. But there has also been criticism. Thota, whose blog is filled with reviews of everything — from books to whisky — has been uncharitably called a 'brand pimp'. He gets gift vouchers and other freebies for his work. "But there is nothing illegal or unethical in what he is doing," says Karthik Srinivasan, associate VP, corp comm, Flipkart, who is also a popular blogger. If people have issues with such 'advertising' they have the option of unfollowing the influencers, he says.

SAY IT UPFRONT

It would help credibility if 'influencers' announce upfront what they gain from 'plugging' a certain brand. "Not all influencers who receive freebies or money put a disclaimer making the transaction clear," says Anaggh Desai (@anaggh), a blogger and digital advisor to Re-

tail Association of India. Desai has been contacted by brands like Arrow, Food India Panda and Bru World Café but only agrees to be part of an influencer initiative if he is given a free hand to express whatever he truly feels. Similarly, Delhi-based lifestyle photographer and blogger Naina Redhu (@naina), considered the first person from India to sign up on Twitter, prefers to set her own terms with brands at the outset. "I make it clear to them that I will put a disclaimer about what I am getting out of the deal," says Redhu, who has worked with Vero Moda, Nikon and Royal Salute.

Unrealistic expectations by social media managers who have no idea of the importance of credibility is a problem, say 'influencers'. "Some managers demand a certain number of posts. But the tweets should be more about how many interactions it triggers," says Thota. Conscious of the fact that the lack of credibility could backfire on the brand, some firms put a lot of thought in to whom they sign up. They don't only look at the person's online clout, but for people who are genuinely interested in the brand. "We ensure the influencers we select are excited about the brand and hence it is a natural course when they tweet, post pictures or write about it on their blog," says Zafar Rais, founder of digital marketing agency Mindshift Interactive.

But experts agree the method of selecting influencers is far from perfect. "You can game some of the influencer scores. For instance, if you have celebrities interacting with you, your score improves. So some people make it their life's mission to get replies from celebs," says a senior PR professional who did not want to be named. Whatever it is, influencer programmes are evolving. The good news is that they are moving towards more authenticity. "The shift is happening. I already see people questioning others about whether they have been paid to make the tweet. It may reach a stage when putting up disclaimers may become the norm," says Aditya Gupta, founder of iG-enero, a digital marketing agency.

GAMING INFLUENCE
 Klout is the most popular service that measures your influence on social networks. There are hundreds of posts that discuss how one can boost their Klout scores. For instance, your Klout score gets a boost when an influencer replies to your posts. So one blog post recommended that people interact with others who have a large following on Twitter, retweet their posts and reply to the points they are making. Simple tweets like 'Good morning' can trigger replies and boost your score, recommends another blog.

INFLUENCER FOR THE GOVT?
 The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting recently launched the MyIndia Initiative — Digital Volunteer Programme to tap people with presence on social media platforms to talk about government schemes and programmes. You can sign up if you have a Facebook and Twitter account.



Anaggh Desai



Naina Redhu

WHO IS AN INFLUENCER?
 Digital marketers identify influencers based on rankings given by services like Klout which base their scores on the number of followers on Facebook and Twitter, number of posts and online interaction. Influencers are then segregated according to their area of interest, based on what they post most about.

Not all influencers who receive freebies or money put a disclaimer making the transaction clear — Anaggh Desai

Some insist on a certain number of posts. But the tweets should be about the interactions they trigger — Hrish Thota



Hrish Thota has been part of many influencer initiatives —Anantha Subramanyam K. DNA

Carbs for weight-loss

Samridhi Goel



A fad that has lasted too long with dieters is going on a low-carb diet. Carbs are not the enemy of weight loss. Most people on such diets may have some success initially, but this diet can seriously damage their health.

Carbohydrates are the only direct source of energy to the brain i.e. sugar or glucose. So going off carbs can result in sluggishness, irritability and lethargy. In the right amount, carbs actually help burn fat: It is a gospel truth that "fat burns in the flame of carbohydrates". If you are exercising to burn fat, unless you have enough carbohydrate stores in the body, you will not be able to sustain the exercise. These carbohydrate stores are the first to get depleted if you start a carb-free diet. Moreover, carbohydrate foods

supply various other nutrients and micronutrients.

Low-carb or no-carb diets are difficult to stick to. You will soon find yourself craving foods that supply quick energy i.e. junk food. Also, when you quit carbs, you end up eating more proteins and saturated fat, which along with erratic binge-eating are unhealthy for you.

If you drastically cut carbs, your body is forced to use proteins as an energy source, and this is not the job proteins were cut out for. The result: Toxic by-products which can irreparably damage your kidneys.

Low-carb diets cause quick weight loss initially, but the weight you lose is usually water and muscle. Very little fat is lost. The aftermath of such a diet: Rapid weight gain, and this time, the weight is even more stubborn, as your metabolism drops. It's important then to know your

carbs. There are carbs that you need to make a part of your fat-loss plan i.e. whole grains, non starchy fruits and vegetables. And then there are those that you must avoid i.e. refined flours and their products.

It's important that you get the proportion of nutrients right — 55% calories from carbohydrates, 30% calories from protein, and 15%-20% from fat.

One of the best methods of weight loss is to zig-zag your carbohydrate intake. Making small changes in your carbohydrate quantity every day can give you dramatic fat loss without cutting down on nutrition. Weight lost this way, along with regular exercise, stays off and it is something you can do long term without feeling like you are dieting too restrictively.

Samreedhi Goel is a nutritionist & personal trainer

BUSTED Here are 6 fitness & nutrition myths that no one should believe

EATING AFTER 8PM WILL MAKE YOU FAT

IF you're hungry, it doesn't matter what time you eat. What you eat and how much you eat does, however, matter. So munch a fruit or have some home-cooked food. Also, if someone tells you consuming carbohydrates at night is bad, tell them that carbs don't convert to fat when you're asleep.

TREADMILL IS EASY ON YOUR KNEES

TREADMILLS haven't been in existence forever. Running has, as has the knee pain that it can cause. Running is a great way to achieve your cardiovascular quota for the day, but excessive running impacts your knees (since the legs carry the entire body's weight) whether you're on a treadmill or on a road.

DARK BREAD IS MORE NUTRITIOUS

WHEN shopping for bread, scan the ingredients. If the first ingredient doesn't say 100% whole-wheat/bran/any other grain, you should know it's not the healthy stuff, regardless of colour. Wheat flour refers to *maida*. Most commercial brown breads contain significant amounts of white flour.

STRETCHES MUST BEFORE WORKOUT

THERE isn't sufficient evidence to prove that stretching before working out will help prevent injury. In fact, researchers have found that it destabilises muscles and makes you less prepared for strenuous exercises. Do a warm-up of brisk walking or cycling to get the blood pumping instead.

DRINK 8 GLASSES OF WATER A DAY

GUZZLING litres of water only results in a lot of bathroom breaks. Let thirst be your guide instead. Unless for medical reasons, there's no reason for you to drink water when you're not thirsty. Don't forget, the body also draws out H2O from your food, including fruits, veggies, milk and tea and coffee.

CRUNCHES GET RID OF YOUR BELLY

DON'T believe those infomercials that show muscled men and women get washboard abs by doing crunches on magic machines. Unless you lose fat in your body, the belly's going nowhere. Only a mixture of cardio exercises, weight-training and the right diet will help you burn fat effectively.

ON THE ROCKS

Contrary to popular belief, the first year of marriage is not exactly the 'honeymoon' phase. It's actually the toughest year in a couple's life, writes Geetanjali Jhala

Here's a secret that most married couples will attest to: The honeymoon ends on the wedding day. People believe that the first year of marriage is full of romance, but in reality, that first year is when most marriages fall apart.

Recently, a study by Deakin University's Australian Centre on Quality of Life found that couples are unhappy in their first year of marriage. So why do people expect it to be 'bliss'?

The courtship, especially the period between the engagement and the wedding, may be to blame, say married couples. It raises the couple's expectations. Mallika, who has been married to an armyman for over five years, says that for her, the relationship changed after the wedding. "My husband used to be a lot of fun. He partied a lot, stayed up late chatting with me, and we had a great time. I didn't expect it all to change so suddenly. Soon after our wedding, he started sleeping early and had less and less to say to me with every passing day," says the 29-year old. "The fights also increased exponentially. We'd fight about everything — even trivial things like why I hadn't wiped dry the bathroom floor after a bath. One time, after a fight we didn't speak to each other for three whole months," she adds.

According to Manisha Pravin Tembhekar, head psychologist, Coffee Counselling Centre, even if a

couple know each other well before the wedding, the quirks that actually lead to conflict come to the fore only after they start living together. "When two people come from different backgrounds and have contrasting habits — like if one partner likes to wake up early and the other is a late riser, or if one partner doesn't like socialising, or if one has a higher sex-drive than the other — a newly-wed can feel very lonely," says Tembhekar.

Take the case of Mumbai-based Pankaj, who says that the sex used to be much more frequent in the two-year courtship than it was in the first few months after the wedding. "We had so much other stuff to focus on — setting up a house, being accountable to someone else, sharing a bathroom — that we didn't have the time, or the inclination for sex," says the 35-year old, adding that all that changed a year after marriage when they decided to move to a two-bedroom apartment. "We stopped sharing a bathroom. It was like we had nothing to fight about anymore. The sex became much more frequent after that."

Being married also changes the expectations between couples, even those who have been together for a long time. Ambika, 29, lived in with her boyfriend for almost five years before marrying him last year. "It was as if our expectations had changed overnight. Of course I had expectations when we were living in too, but I didn't stress too



Sudhir Shetty

much if he didn't live up to them. For instance, while living in, his money was his and my money was mine to spend as we saw fit. Now, there's a common kitty, and suddenly, we aren't splitting rent money in Mumbai anymore," she says.

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Aye, aye captain!



Gulu Lalvani's love affair with boats started when he moved to England in 1956, where he bought his first boat

Anu Prabhakar

It was a balmy morning in Phuket, on a yacht called Happy that was taking me to the 'James Bond' island. This was fitting since Happy is a luxurious three-bedroom beauty that befits Bond. "This yacht is called the Bentley of the sea because it is luxurious and faster than any other luxury boat," says 73-year-old Gulu Lalvani, its proud owner.

Lalvani, a British citizen of Indian origin, is also the man whose brainchild was Royal Phuket Marina in Phuket.

One of the most important journeys of his life was made on a boat. During Partition, Lalvani arrived in Mumbai from Karachi on a boat. He grew up in the sea-fringed neighbourhoods of Colaba and later in Breach Candy. In 1956, he moved to England, where he became involved in the small but active boating community and bought his first boat before he turned 30.

A flourishing business allowed Lalvani to travel far and wide in search for the best places for sailing. A family trip to Phuket in 1991 left him bedazzled by what Thailand had to offer. In 2002, Lalvani met Thailand's then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and was given 15 minutes to argue his case. The meeting ended an hour later, with Shinawatra agreeing to Lalvani's plan.

The Royal Phuket Marina is unabashedly for the affluent. Wealthy yacht owners are offered the option of docking their boats at the marina and vacationing at one of their many plush apartments and villas. "When I go cruising, I look for four Ss — sun, sand, sea and scenic conditions. What I saw in Phuket was mind-boggling," recalled Lalvani. Now though, the ones who are amazed are those who come to Royal Phuket Marina.

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HONEYMOON PHASE?

A December 2012 study by Deakin University's Australian Centre on Quality of Life measured the happiness of 2,000 people on a scale of 0-100. Couples in their first year of marriage scored a rating of 73.9 compared with people who have been married for more than four decades at 79.8