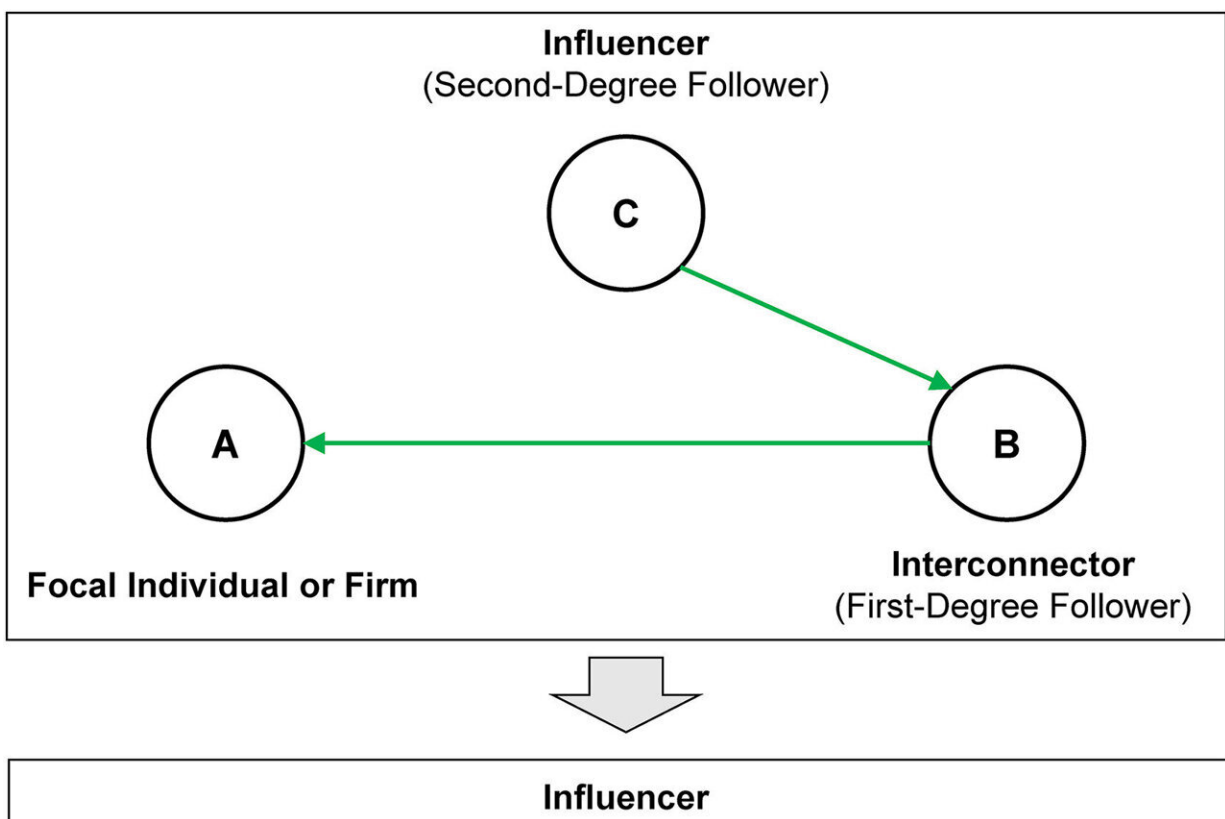


The secret to building a large follower base on social media: Harness the power of nearby influencers

March 19 2024, by Marilyn Stone



Credit: *Journal of Marketing* (2023). DOI: 10.1177/00222429231223420

Researchers from Reichman University and Columbia University, University of Basel, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and University

of Mannheim have published a new article that examines why individuals and firms aiming to build a large follower base might be better off focusing on their own follower base rather than cherry-picking remote influencers.

The [study](#), appearing in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Targeting Nearby Influencers: The Acceleration of Natural Triadic Closure by Leveraging Interconnectors" and is authored by Jacob Goldenberg, Andreas Lanz, Daniel Shapira, and Florian Stahl.

'The best way to gain meaningful followers is to be one yourself'

SoundCloud explicitly mentions this approach in its help center for [content creators](#). Like SoundCloud, user-generated content platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and X (formerly Twitter) understand not only that individuals and firms seek to build and expand their follower base to increase the reach of the content they upload, but also that they apply the follow-for follow approach for this purpose.

Existing research has largely focused on the follower base of influencers (e.g., low vs. high status). However, there has been scant attention paid to the follower base of the individual or firm (i.e., of the content creators).

"This is a missed opportunity due to the tendency of the follow-for-follow approach to attract somewhat remote followers who do not necessarily fit in well with the creator's follower base," Goldenberg explains.

This new study considers the case of unpaid endorsements, also known as the follow-for-follow approach, which is a popular way of building a

follower base.

"When you follow a user on Instagram, there's a good chance they will check out your feed and consider following you back," writer Christina Newberry wrote on Hootsuite, a major platform management tool.

Along these lines, the study proposes leveraging first-degree followers as interconnectors to target second-degree followers—that is, the nearby (low-status) influencers (who are interconnected with the focal content creator)—and provides both empirical and experimental evidence for why this could work.

The researchers explore how such a creator may capitalize on natural network formation in the immediate vicinity to support seeding efforts.

"We maintain that the creator's own follower base is an overlooked area in the network for finding surprisingly valuable influencers," says Lanz.

The importance of triadic closure

One of the fundamental processes of natural network formation is triadic closure—the tendency to become friends with those with whom one has mutual friends. Shapira states that "Our study investigates how unknown, emerging content creators can accelerate this process."

Consider a focal creator A as well as users B and C. Since C follows B, and B follows the focal creator A, the first-degree follower B is an "interconnector" between A (the creator) and the second-degree follower C (the influencer). Now, if A targets C with an outbound activity (e.g., a follow, comment, like, or private message) and C subsequently follows A back, it results in triadic closure—which was accelerated due to the outbound activity.

Along these lines, given an outbound activity from an unknown content creator A, the a priori probability that a nearby influencer C (who is interconnected with A through B) will follow back A should be substantially higher compared to the chance of a remote influencer (who is not interconnected with A) following A.

Using secondary data from a worldwide leading audio platform, the researchers study unknown creators who seek to increase the reach of the content they upload—songs and podcasts—by expanding their follower base through directing outbound activities such as follows, comments, likes, or private messages to other users of the platform.

Results show that leveraging interconnectors to close triangles is more effective. We find that the a priori follow-back probability of nearby low-status influencers—the ones who are second-degree followers—more than doubles; i.e., from 6.68% to 14.37%. Additionally, exclusively targeting nearby low-status influencers outperforms targeting remote (and nearby) high-status influencers—which is the traditional influencer marketing approach—by 2,300% within two years.

For the worldwide leading audio platform that is the focus of the study, the results show that likes and follows are the most effective outbound activities to trigger follow-backs; that is, the mere presence of an interconnector is most effective if the outbound activity type is either a like or a follow.

"The most straightforward way to build a follower base by leveraging interconnectors is to follow second-degree followers," Stahl states.

Lessons for chief marketing officers

The way networks are naturally built—via the closing of triangles—is

most effective for influencer marketing. Firms can keep in mind the following lessons when formulating their social media strategy:

- To build and expand the follower base, firms may be better off targeting followers of followers, or nearby influencers, rather than cherry-picking remote influencers—most probably also in paid endorsements (when paying influencers to endorse the firm). This means that nearby nano influencers are most effective.
- Firms that are using work-related platforms such as LinkedIn as a means for new customer acquisition may benefit from leveraging interconnectors for access to companies that they want to sell their services to. This means that promising sales leads in such companies should be interconnected with the firm, or followers of followers.

More information: Jacob Goldenberg et al, Targeting Nearby Influencers: The Acceleration of Natural Triadic Closure by Leveraging Interconnectors, *Journal of Marketing* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429231223420](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429231223420)

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